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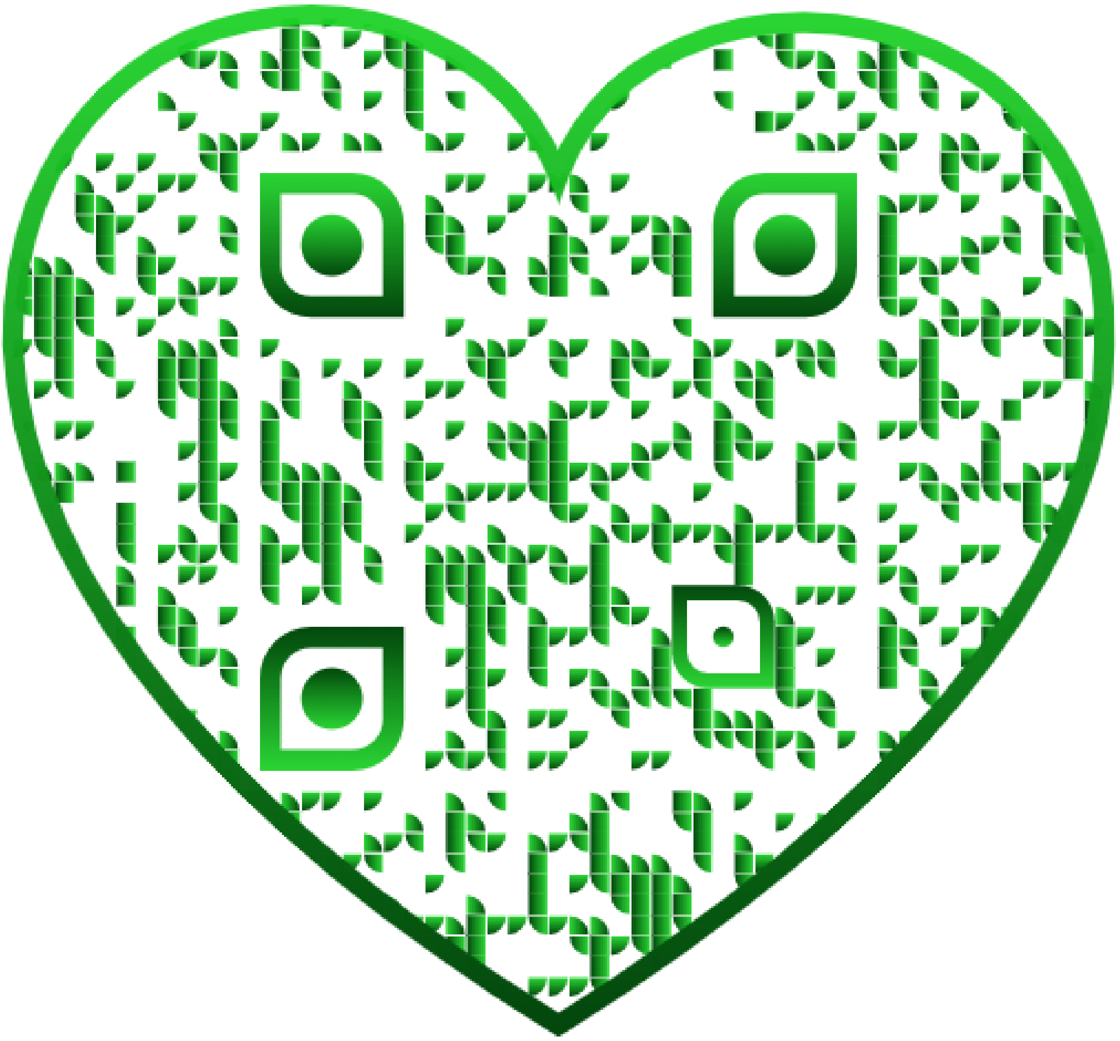

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ISSUE #64

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FEATURES

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Gold diggers!
Karl
Don't you have a shop to run?

INDIE WATCH: MUST-SEE INDIE GAMES

Our Indie Watch: Must-See Indie Games — August & September 2025 list is full of more great indies that our team has been tirelessly working away on.

This marks CGMagazine's third edition of Indie Watch, our bi-monthly article highlighting some of our favourite indie games that you may have missed in the last two months. Our Must-See Indie Games — August & September 2025 list is full of more great indies that our team has been tirelessly working away on.

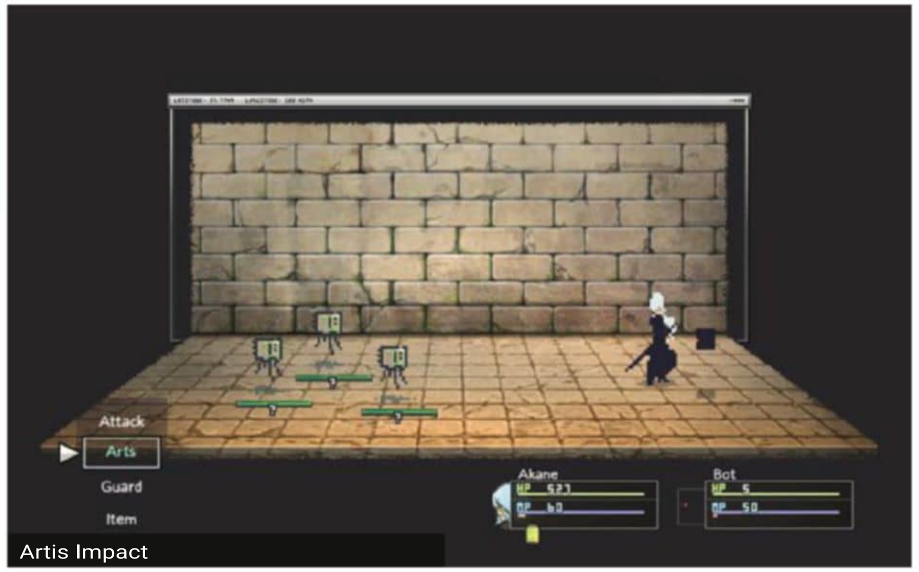
This edition of Indie Watch includes a variety of genres, like farming sims (of course!), word games, RPGs and more. *Discounty* brought some new mechanics to life simulators, while *Easy Delivery Co.* brought chill vibes and life on the road. *Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution!* Showed off that remasters haven't lost their spark, and *Strange Antiquities* reminded us just how great sequels can be. There is plenty more on this list to check out, so here are our favourite indie games from the last two months!

Another Farm Rougelike: Rebirth

Developer: Zabbo Games
Release Date: August 1st, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Jordan Biordi

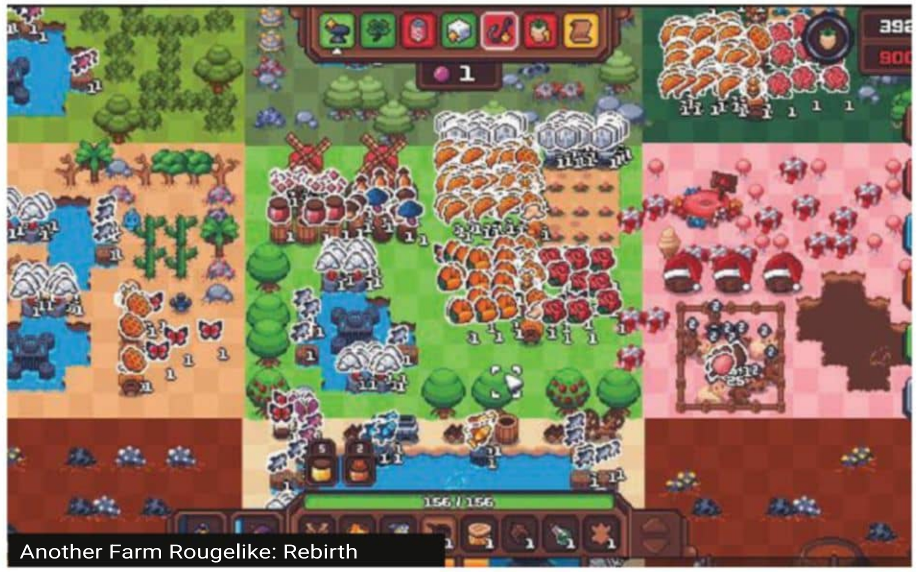
Like I said in my review of *Ritual of Raven*, if there's one thing I love more than farming sims, it's indie games with interesting ideas and *Another Farm Rougelike: Rebirth* is definitely one of those games. What is essentially an updated version of their first game, Zabbo Games has essentially cut all the fat off the farming sim experience and added just a dash of RNG to the proceedings in a way that is incredibly captivating and interesting.

Players still undertake the required function of running a farm: clearing the land, tilling the soil, planting seeds and reaping the harvest, but with some clever twists. For starters, at the start of every week, players must choose three positive and three negative effects to apply to each day—players need to make the required amount of money to pay their rent every Sunday. Performing any action is as easy as a mouse click; however, each action requires stamina, and once it's done for the day, that's it.



Artis Impact

It's an incredibly unique blend of strategy and farming sim, as maximizing your farm's output requires careful consideration of every precise action. Adding to the random nature of the game, *Another Farm Rougelike: Rebirth* rewards every action players take with experience, and upon levelling up, they can choose a permanent upgrade. So, how you end up focusing your farm, or what upgrades are better in the long term, can be drastically shaped by the roll of a dice. If you're looking for something familiar yet radically different, definitely give this one a look!



Another Farm Rougelike: Rebirth

Artis Impact

Developer: Mas
Release Date: August 7, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Lane Martin

Artis Impact is one of those games that caught my attention as soon as I saw it. It's a lovingly handcrafted RPG set in a post-apocalyptic future with some life-sim elements thrown in for good measure. Players take on the role of Akane as she lives her life, swings her sword, and deals with various AI creatures running rampant across the world.

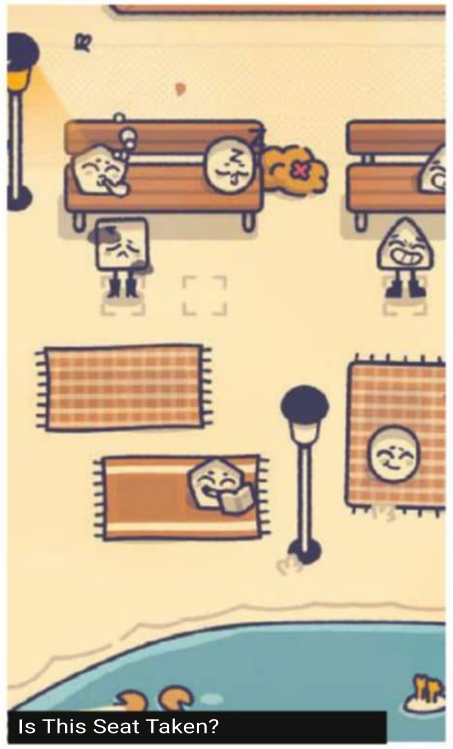
The real hook of this game is its visuals. Every pixel is hand-drawn, which is great on its own, but the motion really breathes life into the world. When I first saw Artis Impact in motion, I could have sworn it was rotoscoped. It's smooth, fluid, and somehow magical. Art aside, ot boasts a deep and interesting story with fun characters and simple, elegant gameplay mechanics. I haven't seen anyone talking about *Artis Impact*, but it's destined to be a cult hit at the very least.

Is This Seat Taken?

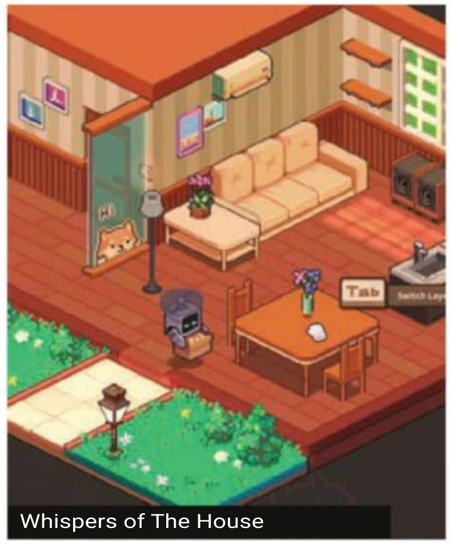
Developer: Poti Poti Studio
Release Date: August 7, 2025
Platforms: PC, Switch
Played By: Lane Martin

Puzzles in games can be tricky. In some games, puzzles can take the form of finding a hexagonal crank to slot into a similarly shaped hole, while others see players formulate a solution based on a series of increasingly complex rules that they may not have even been privy to in the first place. The former feels unsatisfying and barely even a puzzle, and the latter can become an exercise in frustration, often leading to a quick Google search. *Is This Seat Taken* thankfully avoids both of these pitfalls by presenting players with actual puzzles that, while challenging, never find their way into controller-grinding territory.

In *Is This Seat Taken*, players will be given a scenario where people might like to sit down, and then a supply of shapes who want to do some sitting. Those shapes will have quirks and preferences that affect where and near whom they would like to park themselves. A circle that wants to listen to loud music would likely upset a square that is hoping to sleep, and a triangle that forgot to shower today probably shouldn't be near the rhombus who is sensitive to strong smells. Keeping these little guys seated and happy is the name of the game, and it is always a delight.



Is This Seat Taken?



Whispers of The House

Whispers of The House

Developer: GD Studio
Release Date: August 27, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Jordan Biordi

I was eager to jump into *Whispers of the House* because it feels like, for both these lists and in general, I've relegated myself to somewhat familiar genres. It's often roguelikes, RPGs, and life sims, so getting the chance to play a truly cozy game really spoke to me. *Whispers of the House* is a simple game with a simple premise—you clean and arrange spaces for people based on various requests. It's effectively *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer* with even fewer restrictions.

However, there's a lot more going on with *Whispers of the House* than one might think. Its basic gameplay is incredibly generous, allowing players to place items wherever they please, with no real requirements—just do what looks cool to you. It is the perfect kind of podcast companion; the kind of game you can really unwind to. And while there's no *Unpacking* meta-story to weigh on the player, there are secrets and even ghosts for the player to find. But the mysteries only add unique stories to the world and are totally up to the player to solve.

Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution!

Developer: WayForward
Release Date: August 19
Platforms: Switch, PC, PlayStation, Xbox
Played By: Philip Watson

Have you ever just wanted to run to the right and abuse bad guys with your long purple hair? Now you can in this classic reborn, *Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution*! The Shantae series stars an excellently designed half-genie named Shantae, and her mission is to keep Sequin Land safe from harm. Unluckily for her (and us), a self-proclaimed "Queen of the Seven Seas" pirate, Risky Boots (the same one from the title), wants to conquer Sequin Land while stealing magical relics along the way.

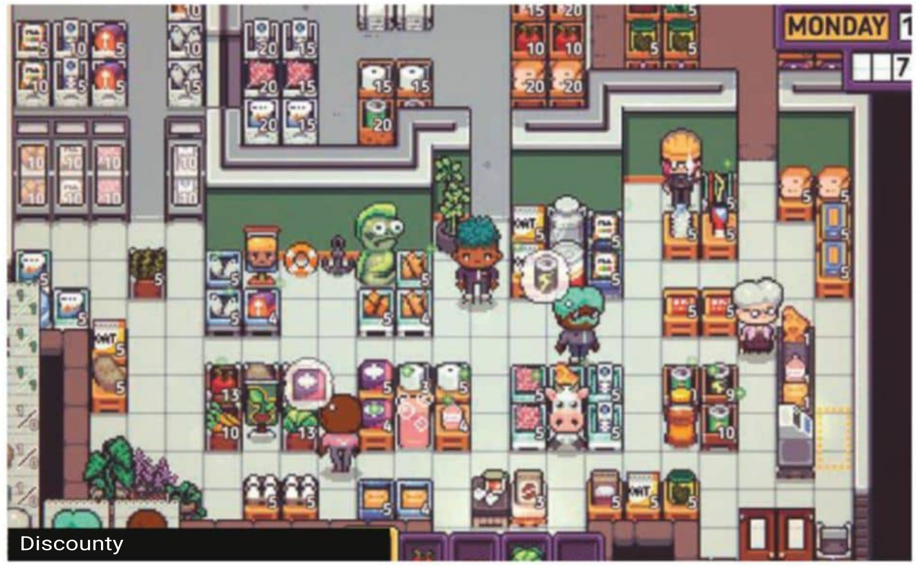
It's up to Shantae to return Risky to the sea, so off we go to the right on an adventure to thwart Risky once more! *Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution*! is an HD remaster of the original from 2004, and it updates the music and gameplay fiercely, along with the menus to make everything easier on the player's eyes. The remaster comes with a Battle Mode option to duke it out against fellow half-genies from your couch, and an option to play the original title as seen on Game Boy Advance. If you're a fan of platforming, tight controls, beautiful pixel artwork and a magic system that genuinely feels like one, Shantae is a must-play.

Discounty

Developer: Crinkle Cut Games
Release: September 21, 2025
Platforms: Switch, PC, PlayStation, Xbox
Played By: Jordan Biordi

I was immediately interested in *Discounty* when it came across my radar because, as I've said time and time again, the only thing I like more than a life sim or cozy sim is a sim with a good idea. *Discounty* feels a bit like *Stardew Valley* from the perspective of the JojaMart employee—and if JojaMart wasn't a completely evil corporation. At the behest of their aunt, the player is called to the small town of Blomkest to run the local supermarket, but like with any small town, there's more going on than you might suspect.

Players will need to manage their shops—laying out shelves, ordering inventory, operating the cash register and keeping the place clean. But there are a lot of small things players can do that really add to the experience. Players can print fliers to help advertise the store and attract customers, meet daily and weekly goals for points to order new items and even make trade deals with local businesses. *Discounty* blends an optimistic story with a dark sense of humour and a gameplay loop that is genuinely engaging.



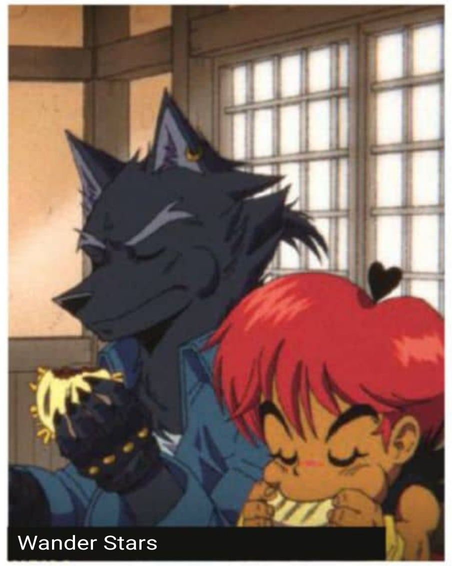
Discounty

Mini Words

Developer: Mens Sana Interactive
Release Date: August 26, 2026
Platforms: Switch, PC, Xbox
Played By: Philip Watson

From the developers at Mens Sana Interactive comes another cozy title to sharpen your brain with, and it doesn't involve farming. *Mini Words* is a word search title that asks the player to find the word on the screen with a few hints. The number of letters in the word is viewable as well as what it starts with, so the beginning stages are a walk in the park. Players will have to start at the first letter, then find their way to the full word while hitting each letter in the word along the way.

Mini Words then kicks up the difficulty every 20 levels, but players can still relax while trying to figure out the puzzle. As a shake-up to the word-finding formula, when using a letter in each word, the lines you draw cannot cross one another, so there's usually only one solution for each puzzle (I recognized this when I kept confusing BEGIN with BINGE). Mini Words also includes helpful hints to aid a stuck word finder, so it never gets that serious. As a bonus, Mini Words can be purchased for less than $5 and includes 721 stages to think through.

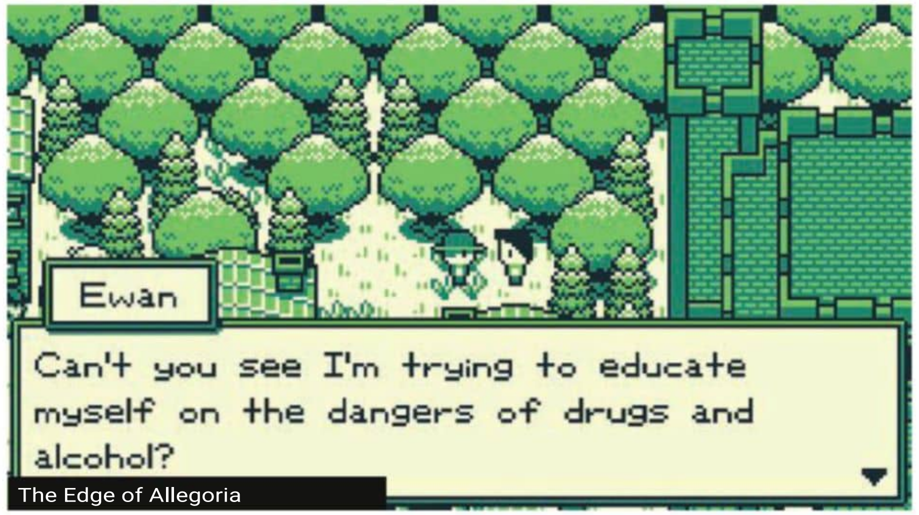


Wander Stars

Wander Stars

Developer: Paper Castle Media
Release: September 19, 2025
Platforms: Switch, PC, PlayStation, Xbox
Played By: Jordan Biordi

I genuinely can't remember how *Wander Stars* landed on my radar, but I do know that the moment I saw it, it landed on my wishlist. It was a game that looked so incredibly charming and backed by an incredible idea—a word-based turn-based RPG with an old-school anime flair. Once I started playing it, I genuinely couldn't put it down; not only is it incredibly fun, but it's a true love letter to 80s anime.


Ewan

Can't you see I'm trying to educate myself on the dangers of drugs and alcohol?

The Edge of Allegoria

Combat is where *Wander Stars* is definitely the most interesting. Players are given a number of slots with which they need to combine words to create their attacks. This runs the gamut from attacks, modifiers, and elementals and can end up with hilarious names like "Amazing Super Fast Fire Kick."

It wears its inspiration on its sleeve, evoking cliches from *Saint Saiya* and *Dragon Ball* specifically, but in an incredibly captivating way that reminds players why we fell in love with these anime back in the day. Its art style is incredibly endearing, mimicking the rough lines and textures of 80s anime, with characters that have overly expressive features and are extremely likable.

The Edge of Allegoria

Developer: Button Factory Games
Release Date: September 7, 2025
Platforms: Switch, PC
Played By: Jordan Biordi

When I first saw *The Edge of Allegoria*, I was initially captivated by its old-school Game Boy aesthetic, then absolutely hooked by its sudden turn into M-rated territory. If there's one thing I love more than an RPG, it's a *subversive* RPG, and this game certainly subverts. *The Edge of Allegoria* is crass, it's foul-mouthed, it's downright degenerate at times—but dang if it's not unbelievably compelling and backed by a suit of interesting ideas.

It's a pretty ingenious take on the traditional fantasy RPG story, but in a game that doesn't seem to care much about it. The stakes couldn't be higher, but it's as if the most apathetic of terminally online people inhabit a fantasy RPG world. But *The Edge of Allegoria* has a particularly interesting battle system where players need to master weapons and armour in order to confer permanent stat boosts and weapon skills. Combine that with a charming aesthetic and a truly unhinged soundtrack, and you've got a game that pushes boundaries while also having something to say about them.

Also, it features references to both Homestarrunner and *Ze End of Ze World*, so you know its creators are on the level.

Gloomy Eyes

Developer: Atlas V
Release: September 12, 2025
Platforms: Switch, PC, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X|S
Played By: Jordan Biordi

Gloomy Eyes caught my gloomy eyes primarily because of its art style. At a glance, it reminded me of *Lost In Random* and reminded me that when I took a chance on that game, I ended up really loving it. Apparently, lightning can strike the same place twice, because as soon as I started playing it, I immediately fell in love with *Gloomy Eyes*. It's a playfully spooky and incredibly sweet story about love despite

Gloomy Eyes

differences and the power of togetherness.

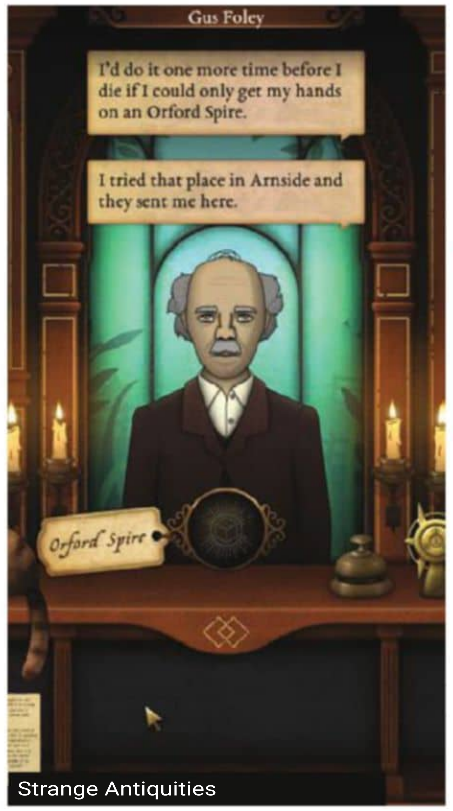
Gloomy Eyes combines a fun premise with compelling game design—effectively working as a Burton-esque *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*. In a world where the sun has disappeared and zombies now walk the earth, a zombie boy named Gloomy and a young girl named Nena work together to find a way to bring the light back to this world. It's a really well-thought-out puzzle game where every level is a small diorama that combines the two unique abilities.

Gloomy has freaky zombie strength and can't hit targets with bones and bricks, but can't step into the light. Nena is a bit more mobile, able to climb ladders and jump gaps, and can activate certain machines. Players freely swap between the two in order to help each one get a little further in the level. Each level is beautifully crafted through the game's claymation-styled aesthetic, and has a lot of fun with colour and its silly horror sensibilities.

Strange Antiquities

Developer: Bad Viking
Release Date: September 17, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Lane Martin

Strange Antiquities is the follow-up to 2022's *Strange Horticulture*, shocking, I know. Just like its predecessor, players take ownership of a shop of strange and mysterious curiosities. Customers appear from the fog of the world with some sort of desire, and it is up to the player to suss out just what it is that they need. Obviously, while in *Horticulture* it was a matter of doling out the correct bit of greenery, now players will need to figure out which of their multitudes of eldritch and cursed artifacts will be the one that gets the job done.


Gus Foley

I'd do it one more time before I die if I could only get my hands on an Orford Spire.

I tried that place in Arnside and they sent me here.

Strange Antiquities

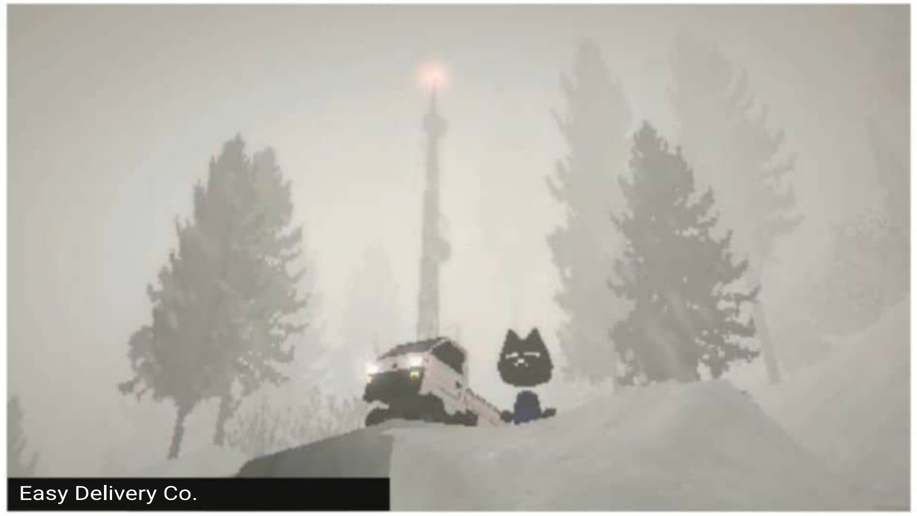
Strange Antiquities feels very much like a refinement of what came before it. The sources of information players will need to comb through are more varied, and the ways to identify an object are even more contorted. It may be as easy as a look, maybe even a vibe, or you may need to hold an artifact over a candle's flame and see if it changes colour. The world hosts even more secrets to uncover, the shop has even more puzzles to discover, and there is always a lovely shop cat to appease.

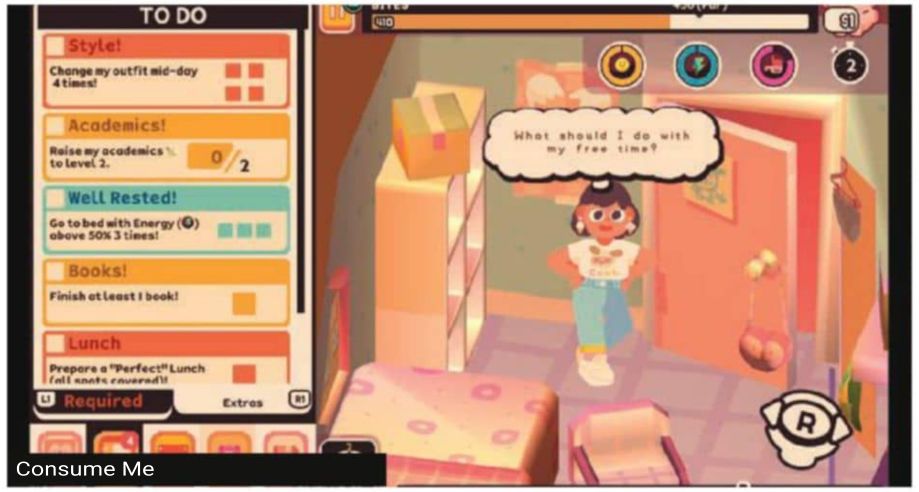
Easy Delivery Co.

Developer: Sam C
Release: September 18, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Lane Martin

There is something really enjoyable about driving late at night with no one else with me, when there is no one else on the road. It's peaceful, calming, and a little bit creepy. *Easy Delivery Co.*, from Sam C., manages to capture that quiet, somewhat alien feeling. Players take the role of a cool little cat with a rad little truck, doing deliveries across a few, mostly empty, *Silent Hill*-esque towns.

Each delivery will net a little bit of money, which will subsequently be spent on coffee and energy drinks, and often involves some sort of bizarre conversation with a shopkeeper here or there. If you have ever wanted to jam out to some relaxing tunes as you drive to and fro in a quietly alien landscape, then *Easy Delivery Co.* is exactly what you need.


Easy Delivery Co.


TO DO

Style!
Change my outfit mid-day 4 times!

Academics!
Raise my academics to level 2.
0/2

Well Rested!
Go to bed with Energy above 50% 3 times!

Books!
Finish at least 1 book!

Lunch
Prepare a "Perfect" Lunch (all spots covered!)

Required
Extras

What should I do with my free time?

Consume Me

Consume Me

Developer: Hexecutable
Release Date: September 24, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Jordan Biordi

Games like *Consume Me* are a stark reminder that the Indie scene will always be infinitely more interesting than the "AAA" scene ever is or has been. An autobiographical game that uses life-management sim elements combined with *Wario Ware*-styled microgames to tell a gut-wrenching story about the issues with self-image, body positivity and general anxiety that not only the creator Jenny Jiao Hsia faced, but that all teens face in relative silence. It's one of the most beautiful and deeply upsetting games I've played in a while.

This may not seem like an endorsement, but for almost the majority of my playtime with *Consume Me,* I wanted to cry. Players need to manage the main character Mei's daily eating with a *Tetris*-styled block puzzle, keep her calorie intake (or "Bites" as this game calls it to dissuade connections to calorie counting) under a certain threshold, all while managing the daily stresses of academics, an impossible to please mother and more.

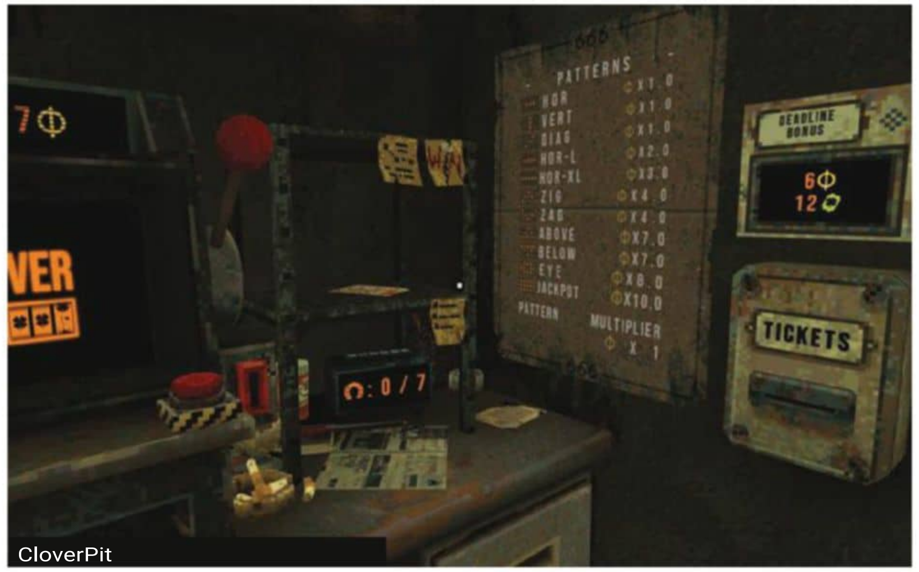
While it presents itself through a cheerful veneer and silly microgames, it does the job of making the player feel an overwhelming sense of dread and the shame that comes with dieting and societal standards of "conventional beauty" that teens need to navigate largely on their own. While its themes can be harsh, it's proof positive that these kinds of games and stories can be an outstretched hand to those who need it, and it's brave enough to try and pull those people in rather than sand the edges for wider appeal.

CloverPit

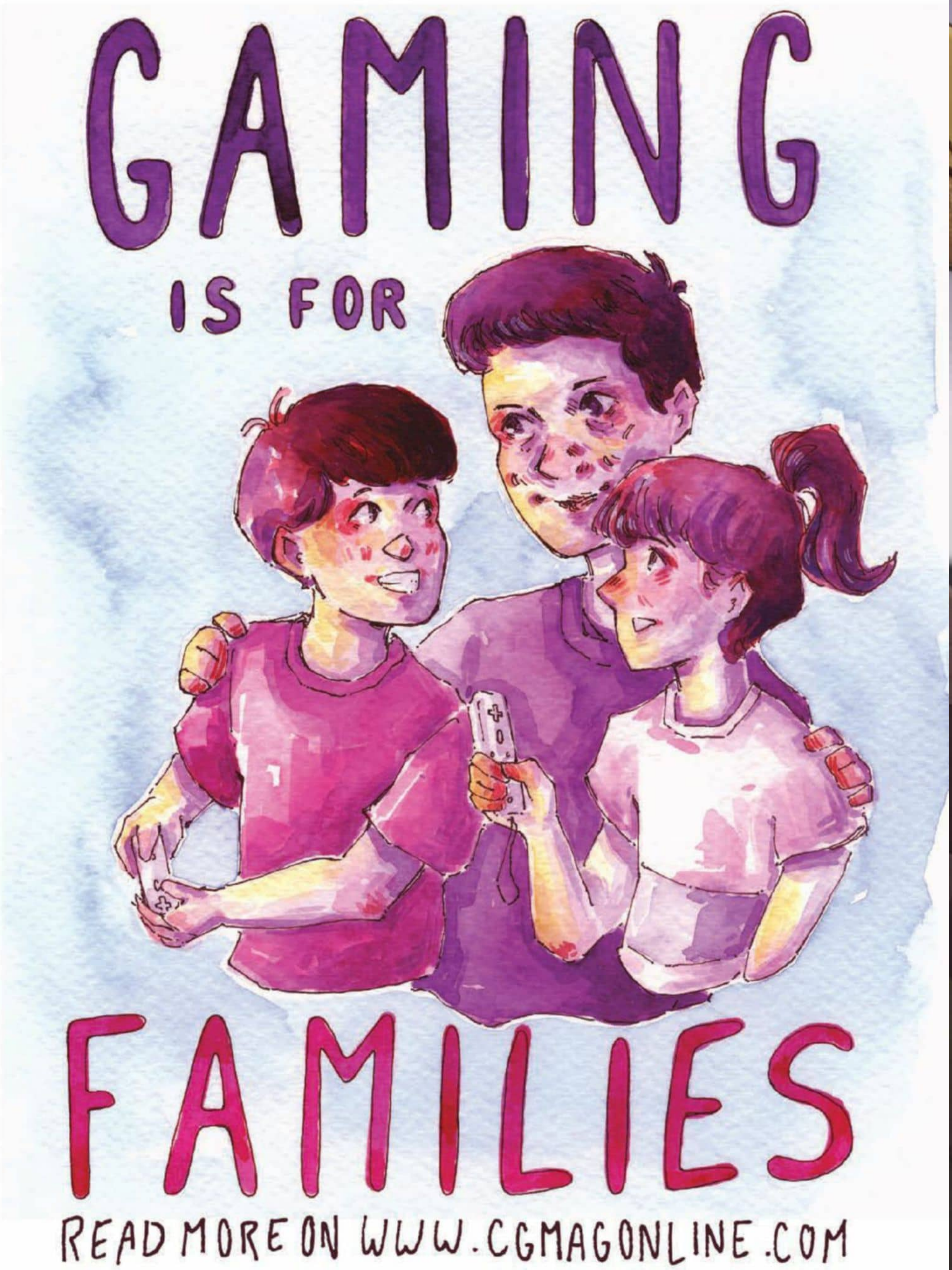
Developer: Panik Arcade
Release Date: September 26, 2025
Platforms: PC
Played By: Lane Martin

The lovely folks over at Panik Arcade might have some things to say about gambling, capitalism, and crunchy, PSX-style graphics. That is, if *CloverPit* is any indication. In *CloverPit*, players must play slots in a nasty, claustrophobic room to reach periodic quotas. Fail to earn enough, and they'll be dumped down into a dark, intimidating hole. The key to this cell is hung tantalizingly on the wall, though the requirements to acquire it are initially obfuscated.

Luckily, players are blessed with everyone's favourite method for incremental successes: rogue-like mechanics. Apart from the sweet, life-extending cash players receive, they will also get tickets that can be cashed in for up to seven rule-altering trinkets, plus cryptic phone calls that may provide even further buffs (Or even curses). The random nature of *CloverPit* can be frustrating, but that seems like part of the point, and the soaring highs will see players coming back to mindlessly take another spin.



CloverPit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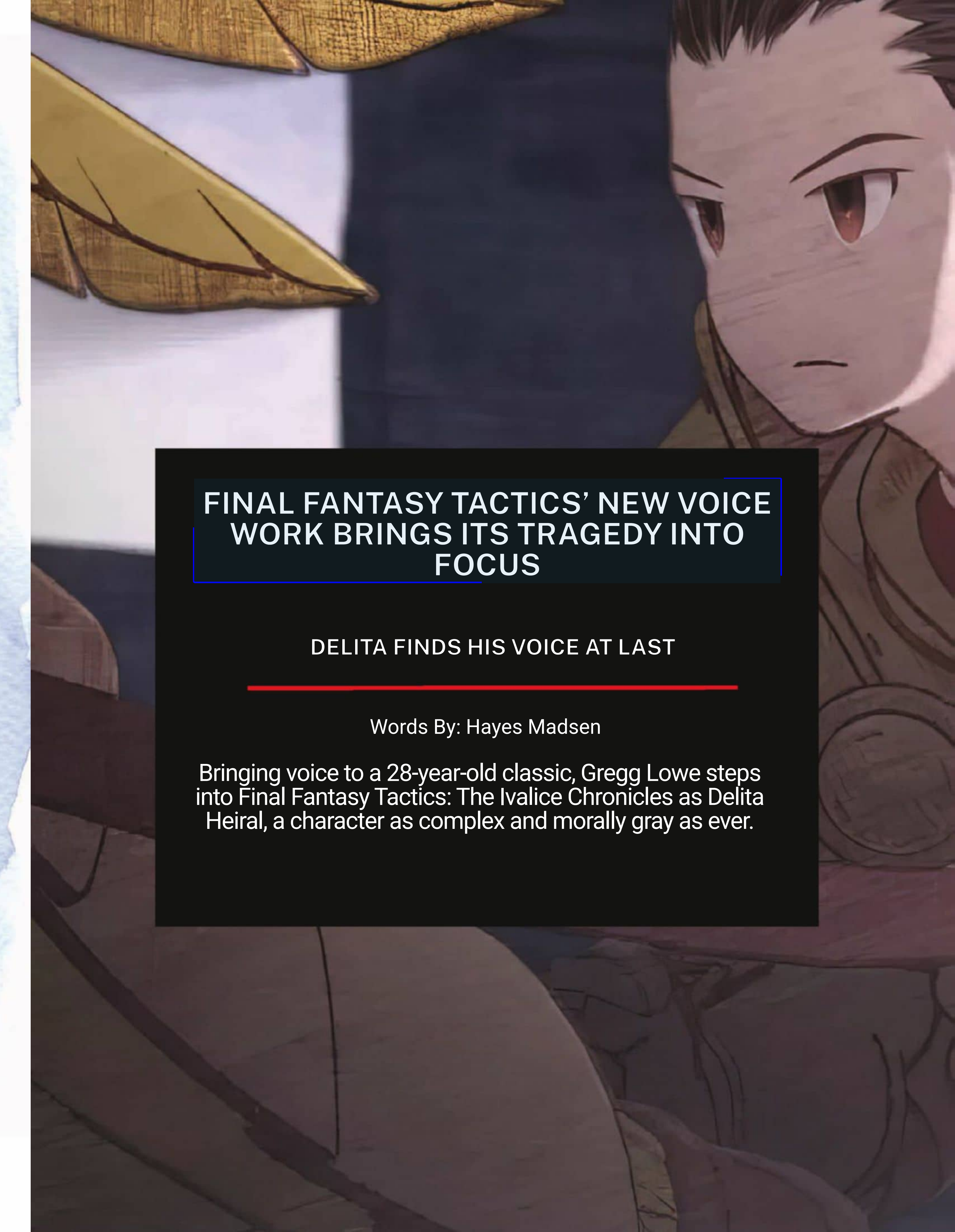
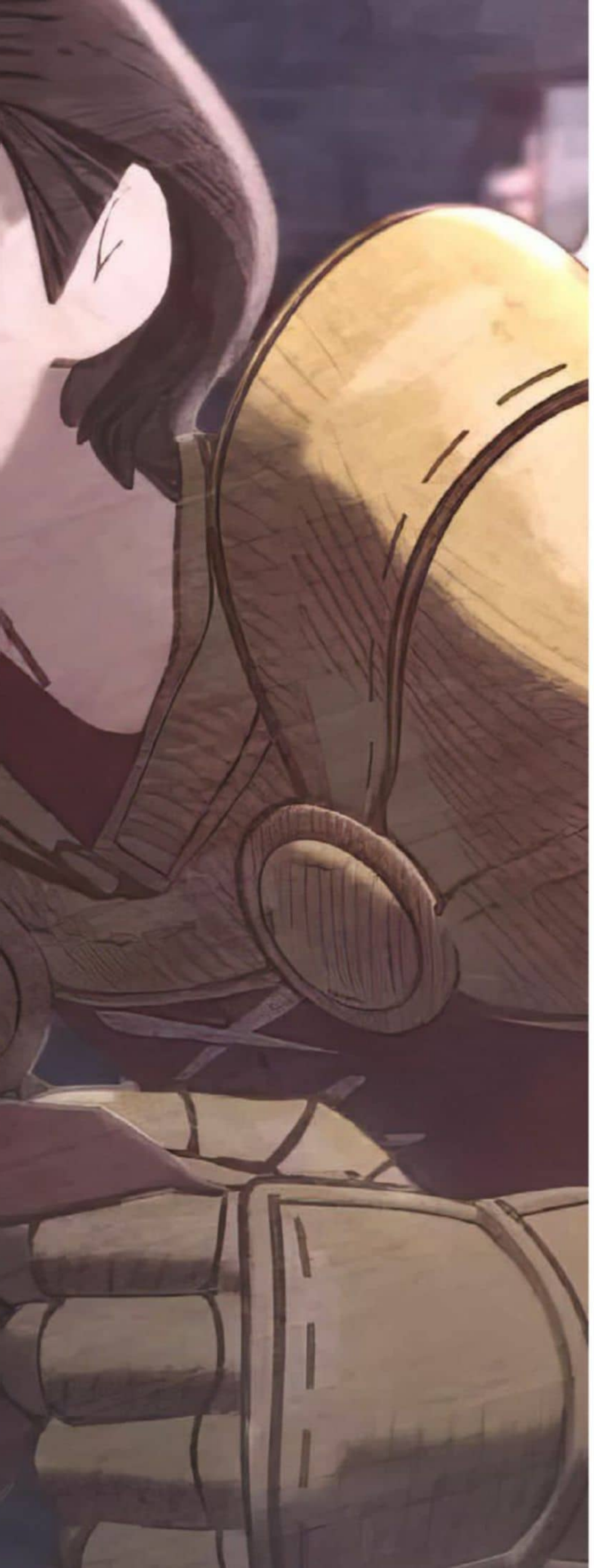


FINAL FANTASY TACTICS’ NEW VOICE WORK BRINGS ITS TRAGEDY INTO FOCUS

DELITA FINDS HIS VOICE AT LAST

Words By: Hayes Madsen

Bringing voice to a 28-year-old classic, Gregg Lowe steps into Final Fantasy Tactics: The Ivalice Chronicles as Delita Heiral, a character as complex and morally gray as ever.



Final Fantasy has built a pedigree of good acting over the years, from the melodramatic Game of Thrones-esque drama of *Final Fantasy XVI* to the grimdark goofiness of *Stranger of Paradise*. But *Final Fantasy Tactics: The Ivalice Chronicles* presents a truly unique opportunity – a chance for Square Enix to further refine one of the most beloved RPGs of all time. That's a daunting task on its own, but an actor stepping into the shoes of 28-year-old characters, fully voiced for the first time, can be especially challenging.

"I'm not sure it's difficult, but having seen that Delita was such a loved character, and obviously, the franchise is huge. I felt a real responsibility to do the character justice," says Gregg Lowe, the voice actor behind Delita Heiral, "The other challenge is his moral ambiguity. He's a very complicated character, and it's something I haven't played before. I've played a lot of villains, some of them are very on the nose – but Delita isn't."

Warning: This article contains spoilers for Final Fantasy Tactics.

Lowe is one of a gaggle of talented actors brought on board to breathe new life into *Final Fantasy Tactics*, and he's behind arguably the most important characters in the entire game. The British-Canadian actor has worked in numerous games before now, including *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, and *Lies of P*. But *Tactics* was a drastically "new" experience for him, largely, he says, because of how complex and ambitious its story is.

Interestingly, Lowe wasn't all that familiar with *Final Fantasy* before being cast in the role, and had never heard of *Tactics* in particular – but he barely stops a beat to note that after this experience, he'd be more than happy to work on *Final Fantasy* again. In part because of the passion of everyone working on the game, but also the supportive fanbase.

Because of the game's legacy, Lowe didn't want to do a lot of research on the original game, and instead approached it from an entirely fresh perspective – fully embracing the game's rewritten script.

Final Fantasy Tactics' PSP version, The War of the Lions, was quite well known for its Shakespearean old-English slant, and while retaining that "feel" wasn't an overall goal for the actors, it did tinge bits of this new version in The Ivalice Chronicles.

There was no direction to make it Shakespeare, but I think the writing lends itself to a certain pattern of speech," Lowe says, "It's very particular language, like Game of Thrones, it's that vibe. The writing is so good in this game, and the localization, translation, all of that – we didn't make it Shakespeare, but it comes through in the text itself."

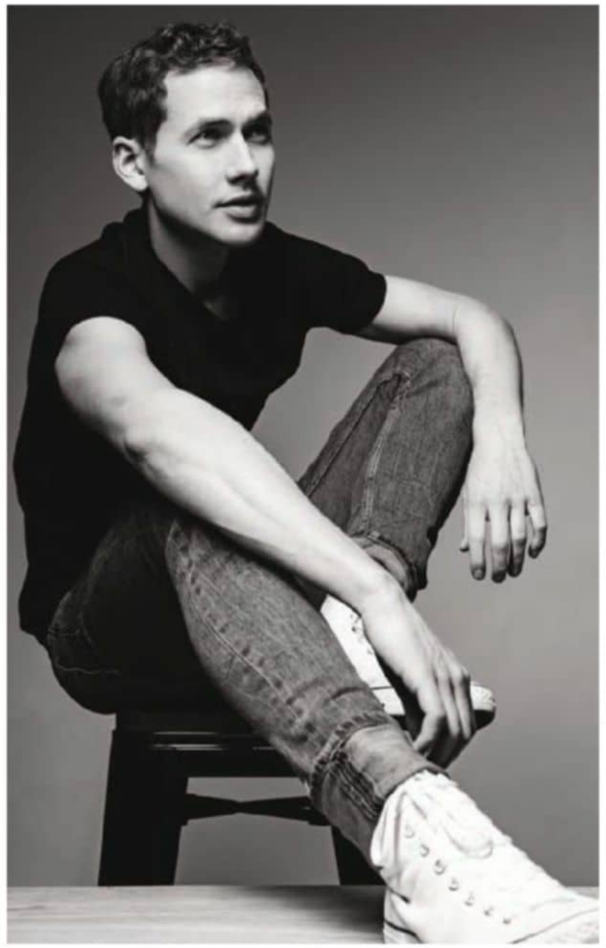
And that comparison is easy to make, as *Final Fantasy Tactics* is equal parts grand fantasy and tragedy, a game with a real ethos and message to impart. Delita is particularly interesting because of the different facets of his life and personality we get to see; a comforting shoulder to the main character Ramza at times, and an antagonistic force at others.

"We didn't want to go too crazy on making him sound really young and then much older, but we tried to inject some youthful energy into it," Lowe says, "The biggest difference with Delita is that as he gets older, he becomes much more cynical and dry. I worked a lot to not give him too much expression, but the gravity of his emotions comes through very cold and calculating. We wanted to show that with his voice, and not be too flamboyant with his words."

Delita's moral ambiguity has had fans debate his role in the story for decades, and while Lowe deliberately doesn't want to label the character as either a hero or villain, he sees Delita has a "gift" of a character filled with nuance.

"He has this machiavellian rise to power, but he loses everything around him. He's so blind with revenge and trying to put the world right in his mind. And there's this hunger for power. It's quite a good lesson, right? That hunger for power will destroy everything and everyone around you," Lowe says, "I think this is Delita's story, in a way. So he's a tragic protagonist, but could also be seen as a villain. And like any good villain, he believes he's doing the right thing. That's something we really wanted to get across."

Finding the right tone for Delita was a monumental challenge, especially because of how integral he is to the twisting puzzle of *Final Fantasy Tactics* narrative. Outside of Ramza, Delita is arguably the most important character Square Enix needed to get "right." While *Final Fantasy* is no stranger to complex characters, even after 28 years, Delita stands out head-



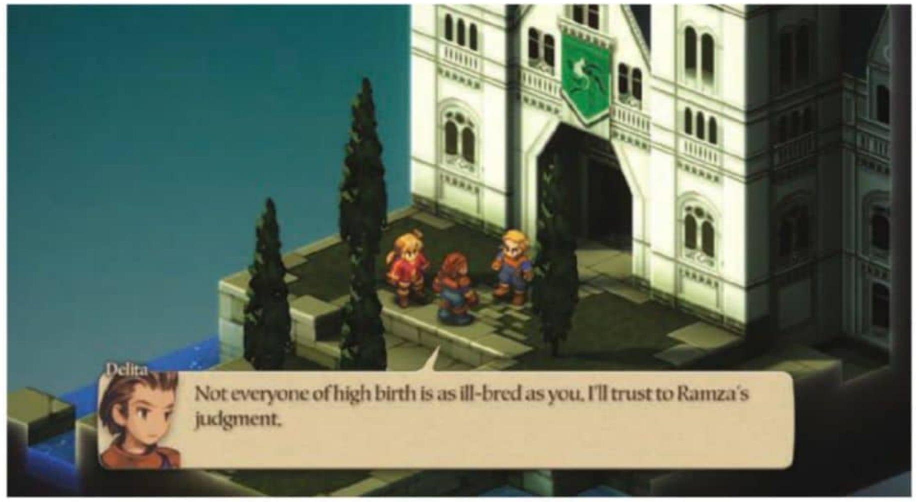
and-shoulders above the crowd. And even though there's a lot to choose from, Lowe feels like there are a few key scenes that really dive to the heart of what makes Delita so special.

Lowe points out the War of the Lions cutscenes as something both he and the localization team worked especially hard on – although to view them, you need to manually select them from the Event menu. He also has an affinity for the secret meeting between Ramza and Delita in the church, partially because of it being his audition scene and the one that "got him the job." But the truly pivotal, gut-wrenching scene is one that anyone who's played *Tactics* will immediately be familiar with.

The end of *Tactic's* first chapter delivers an earthquake of a twist, setting the tone for all the tragedy that's to come. After fighting through hordes of enemies, the party is betrayed by Argath, who mercilessly executes Delita's sister, Tietra.

> ***"I think this is Delita's story, in a way. So he's a tragic protagonist, but could also be seen as a villain."***

"It's such a pivotal moment for Delita, that then informs the rest of his story, that one moment. It's such a cool scene," Lowe says, "There's so much going on, and then his sister is killed and his world crumbles before his eyes. To play that was great, and we tried it a lot of different ways. That's my favourite dramatic scene, because Delita breaks in that moment, and it sends him on a path that will be his story, life, and eventually his demise."


Delita
Not everyone of high birth is as ill-bred as you. I'll trust to Ramza's judgment.

And perhaps what's most interesting about Delita is how he reinforces and plays into the very themes of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, the game's commentary on social classes and oppression. It's a game that wants you to think about its message, roll it over in your head, and dissect it piece by piece. And seeing the juxtaposition of Delita's hopeful ideas and his ultimate fate is a huge part of that.

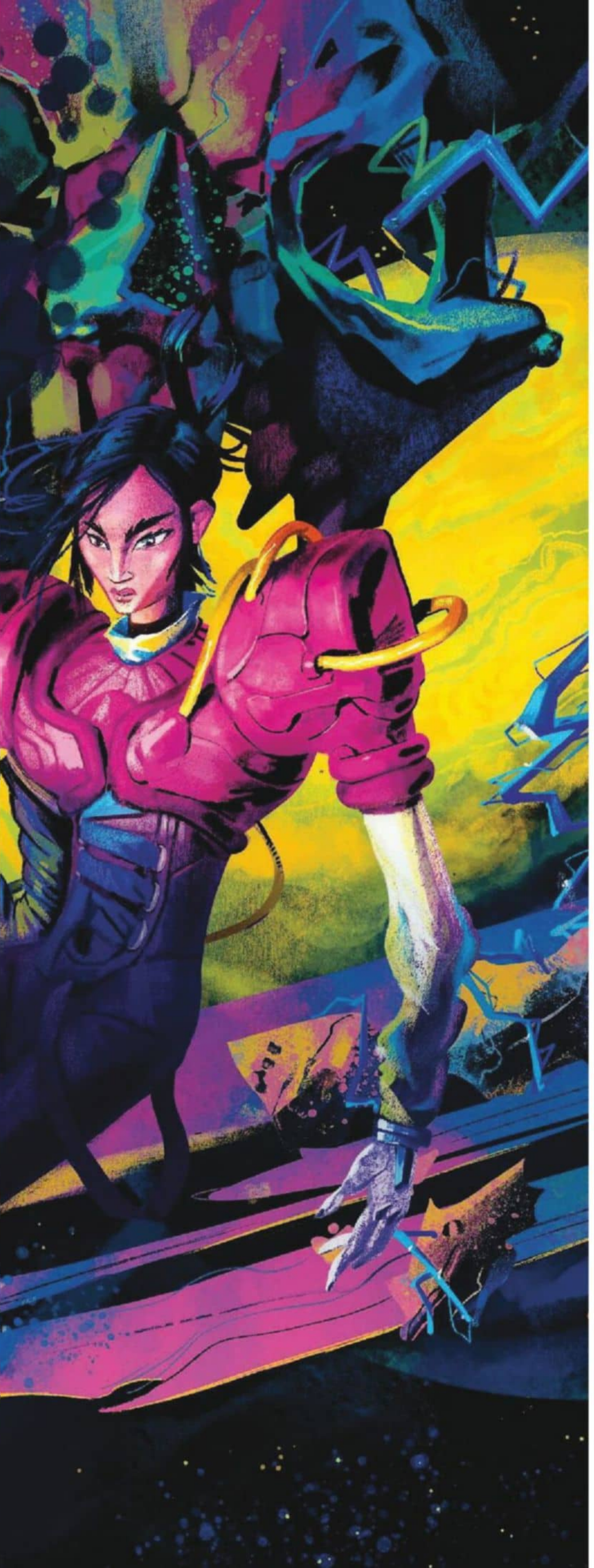
"There are two ways to look at it. Delita is common-born, but taken in by a regal family that has higher standing than him, and is then manipulated by those same people. But he then destroys them. So it's a real commentary on class structure, and how people are treated because they are seen as lower – but anyone can rise up against anyone, Delita is proof of that, " Lowe says, "But the flip side of that is, like I said earlier, that blind pursuit of power will destroy everything. There's a lesson in that for the powers that be, and for people in general."

AMBROSIA SKY: A CANADIAN TITLE TO KEEP YOUR EYES ON

SITTING DOWN WITH THE TEAM BEHIND THE GAME

Words By: Dayna Eileen

We wanted to learn more about the game, the trailer, and just why we should be keeping our eyes on Soft Rains' Ambrosia Sky.



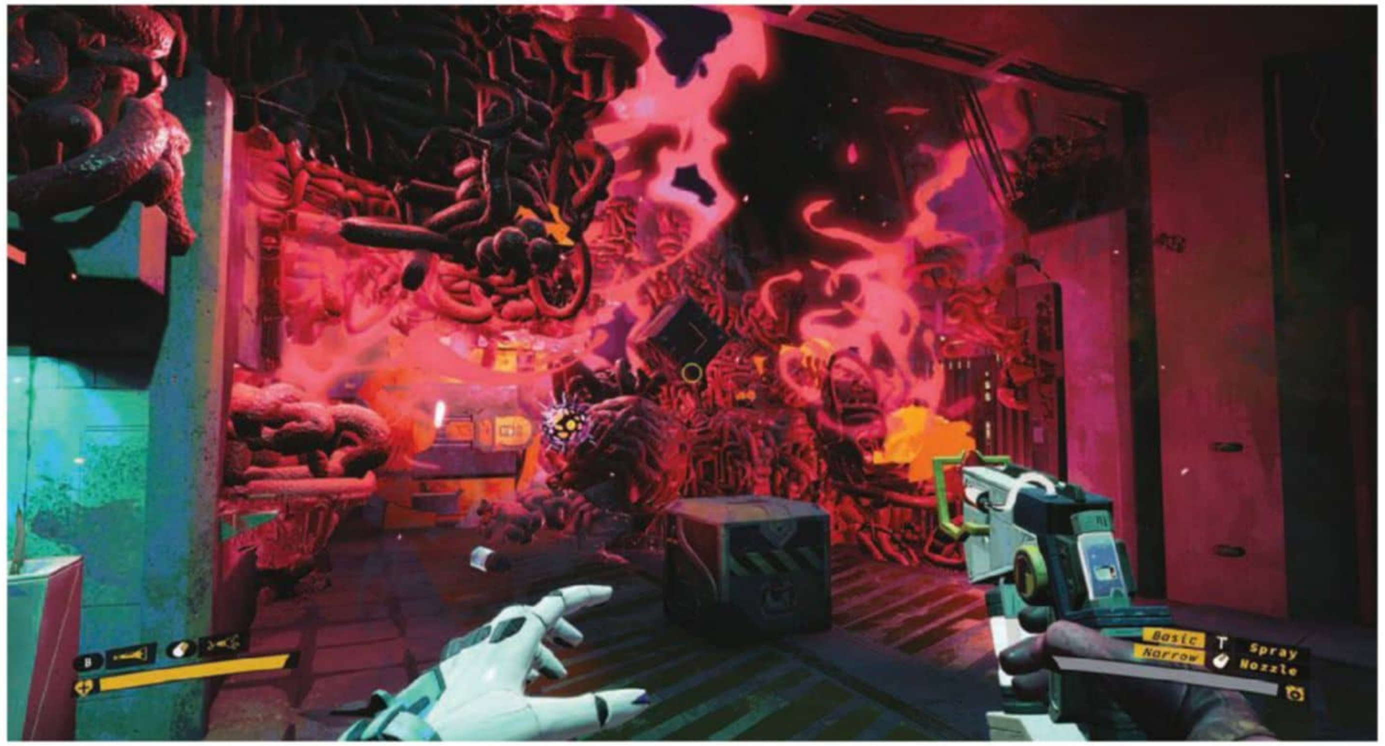
Ambrosia Sky was one of the more unique titles we saw at Summer Game Fest 2025, and with a recent story trailer released, we can start to put together some of the pieces of the game. Part disaster-clean-up, part survivor's guilt, this title from Soft Rains looks like it will bring both a deep story and stunning art style to the table.

Today, *Ambrosia Sky* officially announced the game's release date. The game will follow a three-part, episodic release, releasing Act 1 on November 10, 2025. To celebrate, we wanted to learn more about the game, the trailer, and why we should keep our eyes on *Ambrosia Sky*. The game is made by Canadian studio Soft Rains, based out of Toronto, in partnership with BC studio Blackbird Interactive, so plenty of Canadian talent has had their hands in bringing the game to life. CGM was able to sit down with Art Director Adam Volker and Narrative Director Kaitlin Tremblay to discuss the deep story and beautiful design behind *Ambrosia Sky*.

How did the team come up with the concept of *Ambrosia Sky*?

Kaitlin Tremblay: Looking back, and the more I think about this question, the more it feels to me that *Ambrosia Sky* really was this moment of "What are we interested in making, right now, in 2022?"—we founded Soft Rains at the end of 2022. And we were pretty immediately interested in this idea of job simulators, and adding a depth of narrative to that sort of player fantasy.

And to be honest, when we first started up, we got into the engine almost immediately, and one of the first things we prototyped was the cleaning mechanic. We were interested in the idea of cleaning volumetric and hostile fungus, but we weren't sure it would work until we all played the very first experience of it, with a water gun and Unreal spheres. It worked, we saw the promise of it, and never looked back after that.



Sci-fi was also an early element of the game that we stuck on. We all liked sci-fi, but we were curious what sort of sci-fi environment and story we could tell that felt contemporary and like a true reflection of the moment we were all in. The topic of food scarcity, and how do we feed astronauts and future colonies in space, was a big interest area for us, which led us to thinking of growing fungus in outer space, and the role of outer space agriculture.

And then the Scarab part of it, the death rite portion of the game, came from thinking about interesting cleaning jobs. Death cleaners are real-world jobs, and we were pretty immediately interested in what the role of death cleaning could be in outer space, and how to weave in elements of folklore and sci-fi into the job. *Ambrosia Sky* really is the confluence of a bunch of different inspirations coalescing because we had the right team together, with the same sort of creative impulses and inclinations, and it's truly a reflection of who we are as a team, rather than one individual person.

What is the story behind *Ambrosia Sky*, and how will it be experienced by the player?

Kaitlin Tremblay: *Ambrosia Sky* is the story of Dalia, our protagonist, coming back home to clean up after a fungal crisis has broken out, killing many people. Dalia doesn't know the extent of the crisis—who is alive, who isn't—but she knows some people have died. So the story is two-fold. It's the story of the people who lived here, their day-to-day lives as well as the ways in which they tried to fight the crisis and survive. But it's also the story of Dalia's homecoming, her returning to the place she was born after being away for 15 years, and having to reconcile her survivor's guilt and all the reasons she left in the first place.

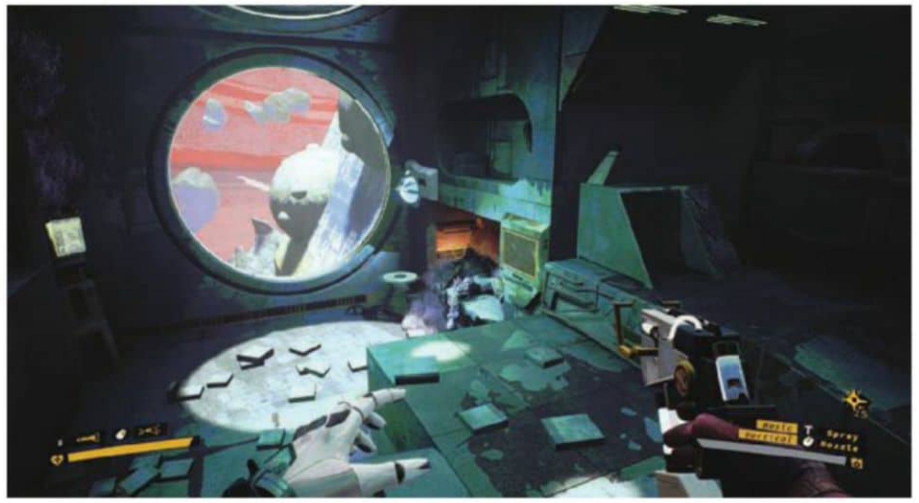
The story will be experienced by the player through Dalia's dialogue, which is fully voice-acted, as well as through "found narrative", aka text logs and such throughout the game. Dalia will give voice to her own emotional state as she tries to keep her composure and perform the disaster-clean-up job she is here to do, despite being confronted by the terrifying reality of what the crisis took away from this place. The found narrative, in turn, will give voice to the people of this place, the ones who died or who evacuated, what their stories are, who they were as people, as a way to give our setting a distinct personality in contrast to Dalia's.

Then there are the death rites, the cinematic vignettes where Dalia finds victims of the crisis and lays them to rest. These short vignettes show Dalia performing her Scarab duties of sampling the DNA of consenting individuals while listening to the deceased's "last will", effectively. These audio log, "last wills," are a way for the dead to give voice to their own stories, to hash out

how they feel about their impending death and why they are consenting to the Scarab's Ambrosia Project.

Trailers so far refer to "The Crisis" and then also refer to it as "just a job." What is the severity of the situation you, as a player, are dealing with?

Adam Volker: The situation escalates for Dalia right from the get-go. She hasn't been home in forever, so the anxiety of how she left things already has her worked up, then as she finds her hometown overgrown, in danger, and many of its inhabitants dead from "The Crisis," things only escalate emotionally for her from there. When she thinks of it as a job, I think she is trying to talk herself down from totally losing grip.



There is a comic book-like style in *Ambrosia Sky*. What was the inspiration for this, and how did it come to be?

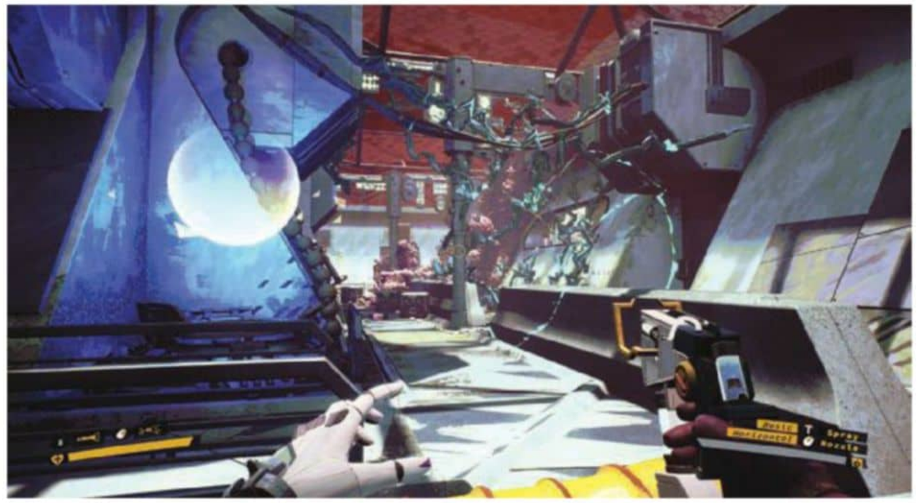
Adam Volker: Comic books are exactly correct! We built a lot of the style of game, taking inspiration from comic book authors like Matias Bergara and other illustrators like Killian Eng. There is such energy in what they do, and we knew we wanted to build a universe with giant dead space creatures, sentient fungus and pulpy abandoned space colony superstructures. Pulling from comics felt like a natural choice.

There is a strong sense of spirituality around your missions in *Ambrosia Sky*. Could you discuss this within the overall structure of the game?

Kaitlin Tremblay: I think there's lots of leaps of faith we, as humans, take all the time, and going out into the cosmos for the first time, trying to settle the stars for humanity, was one of these moments where it felt like there was so much space for this sort of leap of faith. I've always thought a bit more in terms of folklore than spirituality. What are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the things we cannot understand? But there's definitely an element of spirituality in there.

What gives us comfort? What helps us extract meaning from the world around us? I like sci-fi that grapples with these ephemeral aspects. The universe is so vast, and we know so much, but there's also so much we don't know, and I think it's that gap that is really compelling to me. How do we make sense of that gap in our knowledge? What comforts us when we're confronted with a universe that is much larger than we could ever fully understand? No matter where we are in the universe, we're still going to be humans, and we'll still carry these elements of meaning-making with us.

This was a huge element in the writing of *Ambrosia Sky*: what do people cling onto? Is it scientific? Is it spiritual? Is it community? We all cling to something, so a lot of the overall plot and writing is related to this idea of where do we find meaning and how do we reconcile our own emotions in the face of that.



Could you talk about the main weapon in *Ambrosia Sky* and how it can change as you go throughout the story?

Adam Volker: Dalia is definitely more scientist than soldier. The tool she uses is a cleaning device she has modified for use on her missions. As a Scarab, Dalia finds herself in all sorts of peculiar situations across the cosmos, and this is a tool she has modified to spray cleaning liquid. Throughout the game, the player will be able to upgrade their sprayer to improve the distance, cleaning power and shape of the nozzles. They will also have the opportunity to harvest the fruit from the fungal species they encounter and craft special upgrades that have different applications throughout the game.

"We were more concerned with incorporating elements of mythology and folklore into the game than with getting our science 100% correct."

– Kaitlin Tremblay

How would you describe the genre of *Ambrosia Sky*?

Adam Volker: We've been called a science fiction 'clean-em up' and also jokingly a *Metroid* Grime. I think those are wonderful genres! The game is an exploration of both the lost colony on the rings of Saturn and of humanity's mortality. It's slow-paced, exploration, tinkering with environmental puzzles, and completionist cleaning. It's got a great story to unravel, and asks some pretty big questions.

Kaitlin Tremblay: I'd also add that it's very much a sci-fi game, but it's not hard sci-fi. We were more concerned with incorporating elements of mythology and folklore into the game than with getting our science 100% correct. There is lots of real-world scientific research and grounding to our themes and the world and the writing, absolutely, but we never shied away from our weirder ideas because of the science. When dealing with themes like immortality and finding closure in the cosmos, we felt leaning more into the cosmic and fantastical side of things would give us more room to play with these themes and let the story take on a more surreal and strange tone.

What is one thing you want people to experience while playing *Ambrosia Sky*?

Adam Volker: I have the most fun playing *Ambrosia Sky* when it allows me to vibe out and clean a room. I discover puzzles, experiment with the different spray types and let my mind wander. I contemplate the space I'm in, the artistry of the environment and the people I've left behind. It's a very inward journey that is very special to our game, and if we can get a few players to that mindset, I'd really love it.

Kaitlin Tremblay: I think our world is really cool (I'm biased), so the parts I enjoy a lot and that I hope other people enjoy are the moments where our world gets to shine through. Whether it's in the music, or the environment art, or the levels, or the found narrative, I hope players are able to catch the glimpses of this weird world we've put together and find something in it that is neat or compelling or shocking.

Ambrosia Sky Act 1 will release on November 10, 2025, and the game is currently a part of Steam Next Fest until October 20th, 2025. You can read our Summer Game Fest preview here, wishlist it on Steam, check out Epic Games Store or follow Soft Rains on BlueSky, Instagram, X, and Discord for updates.

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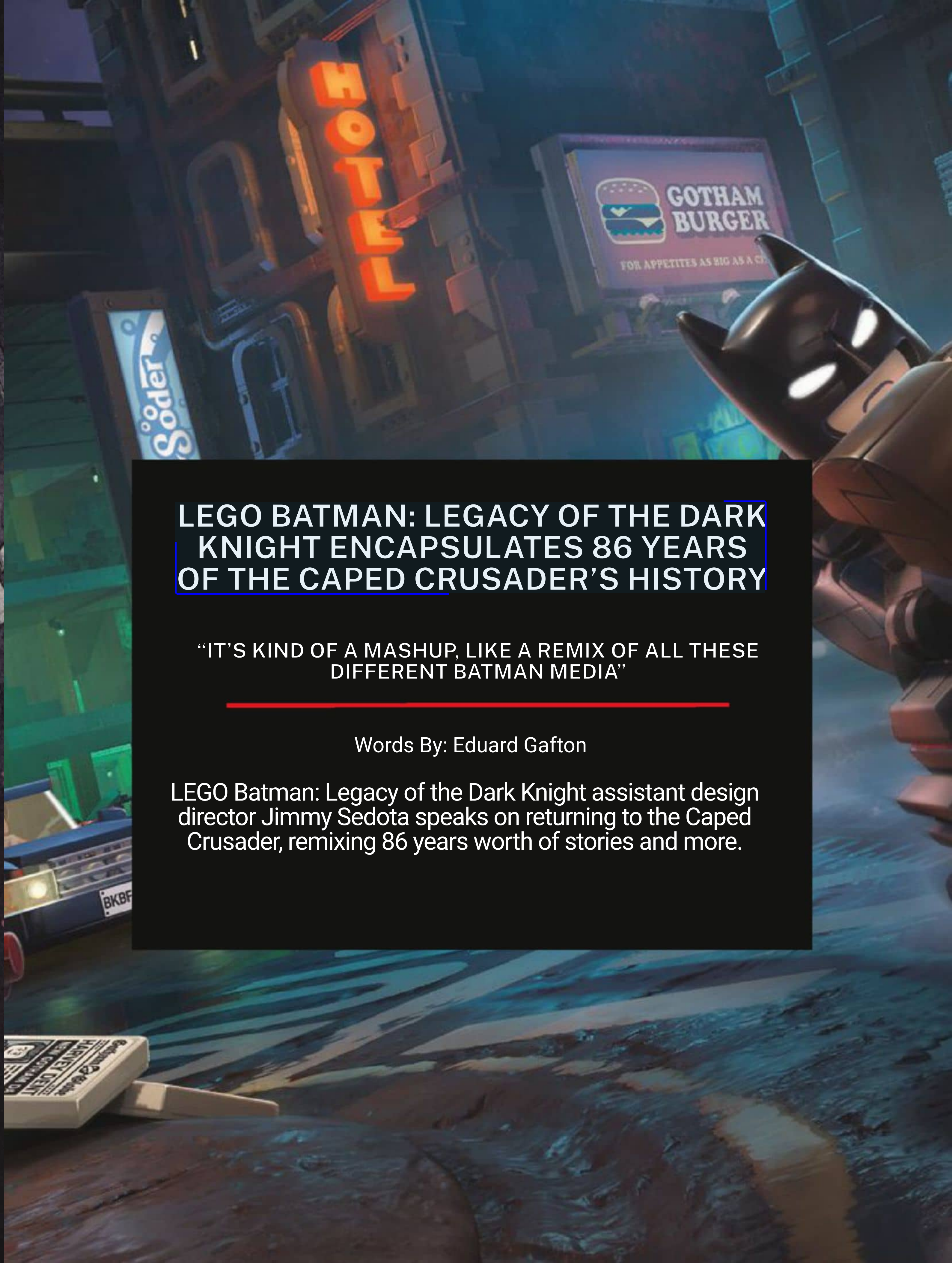
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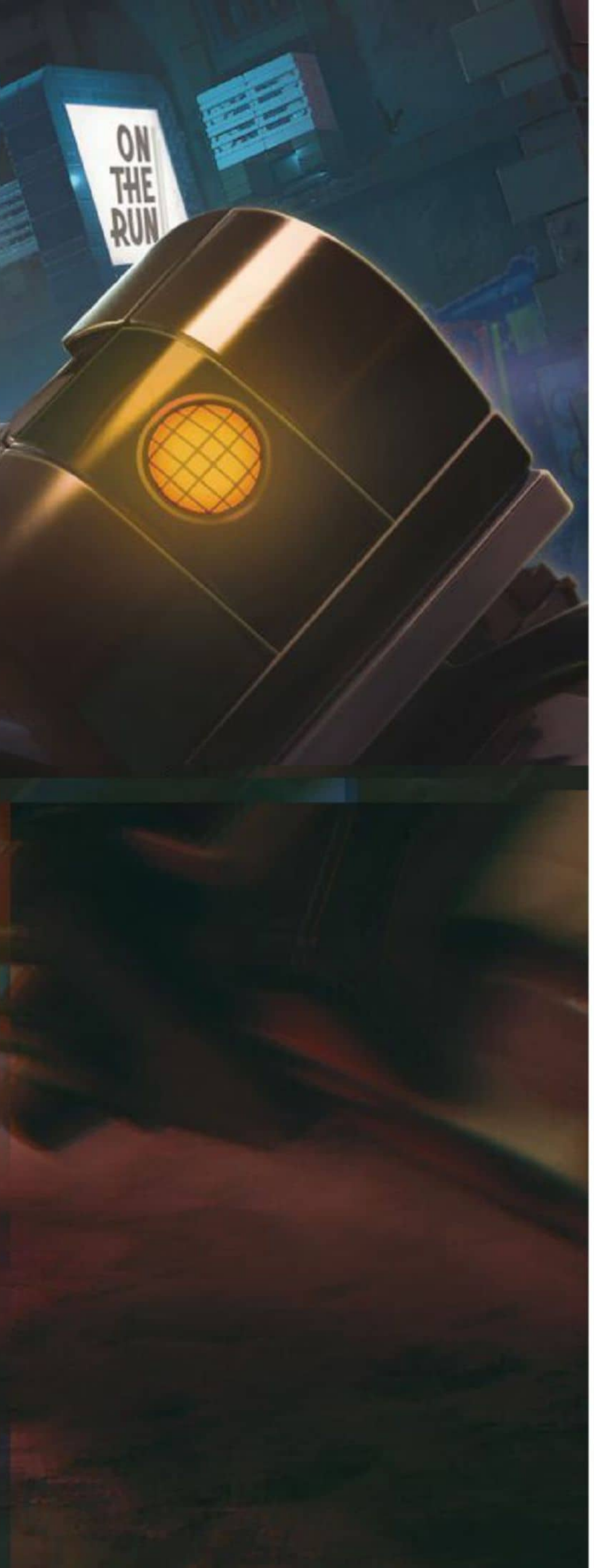
LEGO BATMAN: LEGACY OF THE DARK KNIGHT ENCAPSULATES 86 YEARS OF THE CAPED CRUSADER'S HISTORY

“IT'S KIND OF A MASHUP, LIKE A REMIX OF ALL THESE DIFFERENT BATMAN MEDIA”

Words By: Eduard Gafton

LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight assistant design director Jimmy Sedota speaks on returning to the Caped Crusader, remixing 86 years worth of stories and more.



With the notable exception of the Telltale titles, Batman games of recent history have been split into two distinct strands. On the one hand, there is the *Arkham* series, which puts emphasis on the free-flowing combat, a wide range of gadgets and being able to freely move in an open-world Gotham. On the other hand, the *LEGO Batman* entries have typically expected players to, yes, disperse enemies, but also solve puzzles and put together impressive builds.

The latest game to feature the Caped Crusader, *LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight*, seeks to bridge the gap between these two styles while paying homage to the character's 86-year-long history by way of an ambitious mashup of the stories found in comics, movies and more. As I mentioned in this gamescom 2025 round-up listicle, *LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight* was head and shoulders my favourite surprise to come out of the show, and, after getting about an hour of hands-on time with it, I am certain that it will be the Batman game we didn't know that we needed AND the one that we deserve.

Moreover, following my hands-on with *LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight*, I got the opportunity to talk to assistant design director Jimmy Sedota about returning to *LEGO Batman* after 8 years, the main touchpoints of the original narrative, the many gadgets and vehicles and more:

***LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight* is the first *LEGO Batman* game since 2017's *LEGO Batman Movie Game*. What made you return to the Caped Crusader?**

Batman is such a great character in such a great universe. So, we were really excited to get back to that universe and try to do some different things that we haven't maybe done in past projects. There's so much history here - 86 years of history. There's just so much for us to get into, and we're ready to get to it.

Following your work on *LEGO Star Wars: Skywalker Saga*, it seems that TT Games is focused more so on titles that cover as much lore as possible. What are you most excited to touch on in *Legacy of the Dark Knight*?

That's a hard question, since there's so much good stuff here. For me, personally, it's probably a combination...I love the Christopher Nolan trilogy, but also *Batman: The Animated Series*. I remember when *The Animated Series* first came out - I remember getting home from school and seeing that first ever episode and just being so mesmerized by not just the story, but the characters and the animation style. So, for me, these are two references, in particular, that really appealed to me.

What's your favourite niche reference that made it into *Legacy of the Dark Knight*?

I like that we're touching on a few characters, a few villains in particular, that aren't as well known. Condiment King, in particular, is so silly. But, the way that we're using him in the game, when you see it...you're going to appreciate how we handle that character. In any case, there are so many deep lore cuts: we really jam-packed this game with so much from the comics, TV shows and films.

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Would you say that *Legacy of the Dark Knight* is, as the name implies, most influenced by the Christopher Nolan movies or are you returning to the Frank Miller graphic novels?

All of it. It really is all of it. So, we've created a unique story that is our retelling of the legend of Batman. And so, not only do we reference those events, but we're taking these iconic moments from film, TV shows, comics and other Batman games and weaving our own unique story. So, those are definitely very influential, but we took inspiration from a lot of different things.

Speaking of the story, would you say that it is a cohesive narrative? Or is it made up out of various highlighted moments from Batman's history?

It's absolutely a single, cohesive narrative. So it's not, this movie, then this movie and so on. It's kind of a mashup, like a remix of all these different Batman media put together into a cohesive story that has a single through line that you can follow. It's really exciting - I can't wait for players to see what we've done.

So, for example, would newcomers to Batman be able to clearly understand what's happening?

Absolutely, yeah. New fans are going to learn a lot about Batman and it'll all make a lot of sense. So, even if you're not a deep lore fan or even if you're a casual fan, this story will stand alone.

It's been mentioned that the story starts with a young Bruce Wayne in training, but where does it go from there? And also, considering the many different inspirations, is there a sort of end point to the original story featured in *Legacy of the Dark Knight*?

With it being our own retelling of the story, there is a clear beginning, middle and end. So, players start off as a young Bruce Wayne and, one of the things I like about the early part of the game is that, while Bruce is learning how to fight, how to use stealth and how to use gadgets, so is the player. So the player is going on that journey with him, which I think is really compelling. From there, you return to Gotham and since it's the early days of Batman, you don't have the Batcave just yet, but you befriend Jim Gordon and you go on some adventures as you saw in the Ace Chemicals mission and then you continue to progress from there.

> ***"Batman is such a great character in such a great universe."***
>
> **– Jimmy Sedota**

There are seven playable characters so you'll meet Dick Grayson, he'll become Robin, eventually become Nightwing. You've got Talia al Ghul, Catwoman, Batgirl…you've got a lot to experience! So, as Batman goes through this journey, he really builds out the Batman family.

Considering that *Legacy of the Dark Knight* features an open-world Gotham, just how big is the area that players will be able to freely explore?

It's really, really big. I don't know the exact numbers, but there are four islands. Also, not only is the map horizontal, but you've got verticality: you've got the rooftops, some underground areas and certain buildings that you can go inside of as well. There's a lot to explore and a lot of things to do in the open world. In the gameplay demo that we showed here [at gamescom], we really focused on what you can achieve with Batman and Gordon. But, later in the game, there's Riddler puzzles that will require you to use Catwoman or Batgirl. So, there's a lot more there for people to enjoy. A lot of time will also be spent collecting - it's a LEGO game!

Playing *Legacy of the Dark Knight*, it became obvious to me that, from the traversal to the combat, this is more of an *Arkham*-style game than what we've been used to from the past *LEGO Batman* titles. And so, to what extent would you call *Legacy of the Dark Knight* a spiritual successor to the *Arkham* series?

I don't think of it that way. I really think of *Legacy of the Dark Knight* as our unique *LEGO Batman* game. Again, we've really looked at references from across the board: I love the *Arkham* games - I think Rocksteady did an amazing job with them - but we looked at lots of things. We looked at our own games…we really do try to take inspiration from everywhere.

> ***"Players start off as a young Bruce Wayne and, while Bruce is learning how to fight, how to use stealth and how to use gadgets, so is the player."***
>
> **– Jimmy Sedota**

There's naturally going to be some similarities. It is Batman: he glides, he uses Batarangs, he fights groups of enemies, he swoops down from the shadows…so, naturally, there's going to be some similarity there, and we do take some inspiration from that, but we tried to build a combat system from the ground-up and one that we think would work best for *LEGO Batman*. We think that we have created an experience that is uniquely LEGO, with *Legacy of the Dark Knight*, [by] taking inspiration from many things, including the *Arkham* games.

***Legacy of the Dark Knight* will feature three different difficulty modes. Are there any rewards to playing the game, say, on the hardest difficult mode - besides bragging rights?**

Generally, no. We don't want players to feel that they have to play in a certain difficulty mode. Some players are more casual players and they don't want that challenge. We really do want it to be more of a choice, and you can change between the difficulty modes freely over the course of the game.

Between them, in the demo I played, Batman and Gordon both had two select gadgets. Are those exclusive to them? Do they eventually get more?

Each character has their own primary and secondary gadget. So, for example, Batman has the Batarang and the Batclaw, and Gordon has the Foam Sprayer and the Ricochet Launcher. In addition to that, there's other gadgets you use contextually. We showed the explosive spray gel in the reveal trailer, which you'll be able to use on certain walls. So, there's a lot more gadgets for Batman as well as the other playable characters, in addition to those two main gadgets.

So then, since *Legacy of the Dark Knight* has seven playable characters with two exclusive gadgets each, does this allow for some interesting pairings?

Yeah, lots of really good synergies between the playable characters both in the open world as well as in the main game. As you play through the story, it's always going to be Batman plus another character. And so, we try to ensure that things stay fresh and, because you're Batman the whole way through, we need to make sure that there's new things for him to do over the course of the story.

So, not only are the gadgets different, but even some of their animation styles. When you play as, say, Catwoman, you'll see her having very different attack animations in combat. I think you'll start to feel that they do all play very differently. Depth was really important for us - the seven playable characters have way more depth than I think we've done in previous games with an individual character. We still have over 100 outfits to collect, so we still think that you can kind of customize and have that experience of feeling like you can play as all these different versions of the characters, but, gameplay-wise,

we wanted more depth. There's also progression here: you can upgrade all the gadgets with the components found in the Wayne Tech caches and then, when and if you find bricks scattered throughout missions, you can use them to upgrade all the unlocked characters at once.

What more can you tell me about said outfits?

We've got 100 outfits total. There are definitely more for Batman than anybody else - I don't have the exact number, but it's definitely a majority. But, yeah, all the characters will have multiple outfits referencing films, animated series, TV shows, comics and games. So, there's a lot of choice there and things for players to collect and purchase.

Is there an outfit in particular that you're excited about?

I'm an *Animated Series* fan, so I really like what we've done with those outfits. I think Rainbow Batman, which we had in the demo, I really love and is actually one of the things I learnt about when working on this project: there's an old Detective Comics series where Batman'd show up in different colours. And then, at the end, he shows up in this rainbow outfit, which I think is just really cool. It's very different from black and gold, you know? It's a little more playful.

Moving on to traversing the open world, something that I appreciated is that, for example, Gordon gets his own Gotham City Police Department glider. What's some of the wackier stuff that you had to incorporate into *Legacy of the Dark Knight* so that every character functions in the same way?

So, everybody has the ability to grapple and glide. To allow Catwoman to glide, for example, we gave her a wingsuit, so that's very different and fun. Mechanically, though, they will all feel the same and play the same, so that players can stay together when playing co-op. When it comes to grappling, it's subtle, but if you look at Gordon, when he grapples, he's not really in control so his legs are kicking a little bit. I think that this is a fun way to make the mechanic still work, but still feel unique and representative of the character.

In terms of vehicles, all playable characters have multiple vehicles to choose from. Batman has quite a few more: he has the Batmobile from *The Batman* (2022), we've got the Tumbler from *The Dark Knight* trilogy and we've got many, many more others. All playable characters, I think, have both cars and two-wheels vehicles.

Anything else you'd like to add?

We have not talked about the Batcave! So, of course, we do have it, and one of the cool things about it is the customization aspect. So, you may have noticed that there are collectibles hidden throughout the main story and the open world. Some of them are Batcave trophies and when you collect all five in a level or collect them in the open world, that then unlocks something that you can place back in the Batcave. They're just cosmetics, but these trophies reference some of the comics and some of the lore. There's tons of stuff you can do to customize the Batcave: all the suits and vehicles you unlock are on display there, for example. The Red Bricks, which are also a collectible in our game, are a way for you to put different colours on your suit and your vehicle, so that allows you to go even further with creating your custom version of Batman.

Final thoughts?

I'm just really excited for the world to play *LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight*! We'll announce more soon.

LEGO Batman: Legacy of the Dark Knight is set to release on Xbox Series X / S, PlayStation 5, Nintendo Switch 2 and PC in 2026.

MY HERO ACADEMIA: ALL'S JUSTICE CAPTURES THE SPIRIT OF THE ANIME'S FINAL ACT

Feels Like the Ultimate My Hero Academia Game

Words By: Brendan Frye

At TGS 2025, My Hero Academia: All's Justice showed how far the franchise has come—bigger fights, deeper stories, and a finale that feels truly heroic.

Hearing that Bandai Namco was working on *My Hero Academia: All's Justice* at Tokyo Game Show 2025 left me excited. The game appeared to channel the enthusiasm of fans who have long awaited a title matching the energy of the anime's final arc. From what I saw, I am eager to sit down and play the full release.

Developed by Byking Inc. and set for launch in February 2026, this 3D arena fighter aims to close the *My Hero One's Justice* trilogy by diving into the Final War storyline. From speaking with people involved in development, it was clear they are as enthusiastic about the project as the fans waiting to play it.

My Hero Academia: All's Justice is set during the series' dramatic last act, and combines many aspects of the show and manga to build something that feels very true to the franchise. It brings together Pro Heroes, U.A. students, and their villainous counterparts, letting players step into the shoes of well-known characters in new and visually striking forms that feel ripped right from the anime.

Even in my short time with the game, there was a clear emphasis on character variety. Class 1-A is fully playable for the first time, alongside series staples and fan-favourite villains. Each fighter feels distinct thanks to moves inspired by their unique Quirks, from Deku's Blackwhip-powered combos to Uraraka's gravity-defying attacks. The roster is the most expansive and diverse yet seen in a *My Hero* title.

Speaking with producer Aoba Miyazaki, she explained: "You use their Quirks—their unique abilities and movements—to clear missions. By doing so, I think players will really be able to feel the world of *My Hero Academia*."

During gameplay at TGS 2025, *My Hero Academia: All's Justice* streamlined and intensified combat, cutting down on some of the floatiness that marked earlier entries. Every fight unfolds in large, open arenas where movement feels weightier and more responsive. Players can build up the new Rising meter during battle, activating ultimate forms with speed boosts and devastating combo potential. The change adds an extra layer of strategy and excitement to the action. When the meter fills, triggering Rising feels suitably dramatic, tipping the odds and keeping each brawl unpredictable until the last hit.

From what Bandai Namco showed during my session, *My Hero Academia: All's Justice* felt expansive, showcasing a full, living city that encourages players to explore and take on missions beyond standard PvP battles. The game's structure offers more than a string of fights: it includes story-driven sequences and side tasks that explore what it means to be a hero.

> ***"During gameplay at TGS 2025, My Hero Academia: All's Justice streamlined and intensified combat, cutting down on some of the floatiness that marked earlier entries."***

From teaming up in creative ways to answering calls for help, the game looks to balance intense clashes with everyday acts of heroism. In one mission, for instance, Deku and All Might join forces to subdue a rampaging Nomu, highlighting not only flashy combat but also the series' spirit of teamwork and growth. That focus has always been central to the franchise, and seeing it implemented in a way that feels natural was fantastic to experience. It is clear that the development team knows the anime well and has genuine love for it.

That passion was reaffirmed when speaking with Miyazaki: "Our staff are huge *My Hero Academia* fans. So for the things we proposed, the other side almost never rejected them. Because honestly, our perspectives were very much aligned."

This love of the franchise runs through every aspect of the game, with the visuals in *My Hero Academia: All's Justice* looking sharp, bright and vibrant, as if pulled straight from the anime. Borrowing from a stylized comic book look, the game amplifies vibrancy and personality in every bout, with character models and animations that showcase iconic attacks and cinematic flourishes. From powerful tag-team Plus Ultra attacks to environmental destruction, each match feels dramatic and closely tied to the anime's signature moments. At the same time, unique elements give the game an identity of its own, making it feel essential for anyone seeking the full *My Hero* experience.

As Miyazaki explained, "We properly collaborated with the original staff to create the game. At the same time, we aimed to make the gameplay experience itself very strong. So I would really like players to see the

unique ending of *My Hero Academia* that exists only in the game."

For series fans, there is plenty to explore—even before the battles begin. The story mode retraces the Final War arc, featuring fights that mirror key moments from the show while offering exclusive new cinematics. I did not experience this aspect first-hand, but even from the trailer, it was exciting to see.

The roster includes not only core U.A. students and pro heroes but also villain powerhouses and lesser-seen faces, each with their own Quirks and move sets. While there is still some lightness to attack collisions—an area the developers have worked hard to address—the improvements in pacing, animation, and impact were clear during every demo session.

My Hero Academia: All's Justice feels packed with content, built by people who clearly love the franchise. Beyond the story mode, the game offers solid online and offline PvP options, including 3v3 tag-team play and a tag system that encourages fast swapping and clever combo chaining. Victory depends on more than raw strength: it relies on timing, teamwork and using each character's Quirks to outwit opponents in high-stakes clashes.

As a fan of the series, I was excited to see what Bandai Namco had in store for *My Hero Academia: All's Justice*, and after playing it at TGS 2025, I cannot wait for its February 2026 release. The expanded character selection, deeper exploration mechanics and commitment to capturing both the spectacle and heart of the anime set it apart for fans and newcomers alike.

It is always fantastic to see games built by people excited for the source material, while not being afraid to try new things. From what I saw of *My Hero Academia: All's Justice* so far, it looks like the franchise is in good hands, and we can see how it all shapes up when it hits PC and Console early 2026.

HYRULE WARRIORS: AGE OF IMPRISONMENT PREVIEW — EXPANDING EVENTS TEASED IN TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Combos, Sync Strikes & Zonai Devices Galore!

Words By: Dayna Eileen

We went hands-on with Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment at a Nintendo Canada event, and we can't wait to play the full release this November.

Nintendo Canada invited CGMagazine to a brief hands-on preview of *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment* ahead of their October holiday event. We spent about 45 minutes playing through a repeated 10-minute section of the game. After 10 minutes, the preview ended, no matter how far you are. The game was also playable at the holiday showcase, and we were able to move through it freely, repeatedly, to learn more about Zelda and her companions, as well as a bit about how the game plays overall.

> **“Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment looks like it is going to be a lot of fun, especially for those invested in The Legend of Zelda franchise.”**

Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment follows Zelda after she travels back in time and joins the war against the Demon King Ganondorf’s invasion. This war, now known as the Imprisoning War, was briefly alluded to in *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, and now players will get the chance to dive deeper into the story. The section we played didn’t reveal much in terms of story, but it did give us a walkthrough of a few of the mechanics available in *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment.*

In our playthrough, we had access to Zelda, Rauru and Mineru, who were all playable. Each character brings something entirely unique to the table so far. Zelda is more of a ranged character, where Rauru is more like a tank, and Mineru is a DPS role who uses Zonai devices to traverse the map. I found myself wanting to stick with Zelda most, both because she’s the coolest—obviously—and because I’ve always mastered ranged over anything else.

Lots of speculation has been going around about playable characters in *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment*, largely from screenshots released by Koei Tecmo. So far, Argusta, the chief of the Goron tribe, Kia, a princess of the Zora tribe, Krafika, the leader of the Rito tribe, and Ardi, a warrior from the Gerudo tribe, are rumoured to be playable thanks to some screenshots. The trailer above also says, “fight alongside your allies, like this brave Korok.” Plus Zelda, RauRu and Mineru, whom I went hands-on with. Hopefully, an official list will be released soon!

Something that has been seen in trailers for *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment* is the new Sync Strike mechanic. Once a bar on the left side of the screen is charged, you can trigger a Sync Strike, which pulls whichever character you are and whoever you triggered together to create a new kind of combat.

I was only able to trigger this with Zelda and Mineru or Zelda and Rauru, but the trailer shows it between other characters as well. Sync Strikes offer high-damage or other effects. In my case, Zelda was flung on the other’s shoulders to create a new mechanic where I could smash and bash whoever we were fighting.

Zonai devices were also available to test out during our *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment* preview. I preferred one that would blast the room with fire, doing damage to anything that came near it. You can walk with these devices in hand, aiming them at anything in front of you, or you can place them down to assist while you fight your way through waves of enemies. There is something very satisfying about knocking down hordes of enemies with fire. Water and wind have also been unveiled so far, so there will be some options in your gameplay.

In *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment,* there is a bar on the left side of the screen that you will see during battle. It will look like a series of Ys and Xs, and it will light up as you press those buttons. Essentially, these are combos, which allow you to chain your X and Y attacks for different results. There are many combinations that look something like Y-Y-Y-X, or Y-X or even Y-Y-Y-X2.

It is something we're familiar with in gaming, but seeing it displayed on the screen and reacting gives you confirmation that you are doing something right. I think it is especially great for new or younger players diving into *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment.*

For co-op players, *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment* will feature couch co-op, so you and one friend can play the game in split screen. Considering the party was three players, I thought it was a bit strange that you can’t have three-player co-op, but I get that the screen splitting could be awkward. The game will also feature Game Share, allowing players who only own the game to join in on another system as well.

Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment looks like it is going to be a lot of fun, especially for those invested in the *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, with nods to events mentioned in *Tears of the Kingdom. Hyrule Warriors: Age of Imprisonment* will release on Nintendo Switch 2 on November 6th, 2025, for $69.99 USD/$99.99 CAD.

REVIEWS

ROG XBOX ALLY — ROG XBOX ALLY X
SPLINTER CELL: DEATHWATCH
TRON: ARES — BATTLEFIELD 6
VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2
KEEPER — LITTLE NIGHTMARES III – NINJA GAIDEN 4
THE OUTER WORLDS 2 – POKÉMON LEGENDS: Z-A
DIGIMON STORY TIME STRANGER

7.5

ROG XBOX ALLY

ROG & Xbox Push to Close the Gap Between Console & PC Gaming

Manufacturer: ROG & Xbox
Type: Handheld Gaming System

MSRP: $599.99
Reviewed By: Brendan Frye

When ASUS and Microsoft teased that they were working on a new Xbox device together, I had to admit I was excited. The handheld gaming space has become crowded, with devices competing for attention in a market that demands both power and portability. But after spending considerable time with the ROG Xbox Ally, I can see how this partnership delivers clear improvements for players and offers an overall better gaming experience for anyone looking to explore the PC handheld market.

As the marketing materials and trailers tease, the ROG Xbox Ally brings together three major players—ASUS, Xbox and Windows—to create something that feels like a true evolution of what came before. Under the hood, this handheld runs on an AMD Ryzen Z2 A processor with four cores and eight threads, paired with AMD Radeon graphics. For comparison, the ROG Xbox Ally X features the AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme.

The device operates at a power draw between five and 15 watts, providing solid efficiency without requiring frequent trips to a power outlet. It also comes with 16 GB of high-speed LPDDR5-6400 memory and 512 GB of PCIe 4.0 storage, providing enough space for several AAA games or a range of indie titles without needing to clear the drive.

There are already plenty of strong PC-based handhelds on the market, but what makes the ROG Xbox Ally stand out isn't the hardware, though its specs are impressive for a device that weighs just 670 grams. The real selling point is the overall gaming experience. Microsoft and ASUS have built a new full-screen Xbox interface specifically for this handheld, and it changes how you interact with games from the moment you power it on. The setup process has been refined to work seamlessly with the device's controls, allowing you to navigate entirely with the thumbsticks and buttons instead of fumbling with touchscreen inputs.

> ***"Since the ROG Xbox Ally is an AMD-based device, it supports the full suite of Radeon graphics technologies..."***

The software experience is the special sauce, if you will, that makes the ROG Xbox Ally feel like an Xbox. Once you're past setup, the Xbox interface greets you with something instantly familiar if you've ever used a console, and it's one of the key aspects that elevate the experience. Your game library sits front and centre, pulling in titles from Xbox, Game Pass and even third-party storefronts like Battle.net into a single unified view.

This aggregated library approach brings the ROG Xbox Ally much more in line with what you'll find on a Steam Deck: a frictionless gaming interface that keeps you from jumping between different apps just to find what you want to play. When you launch a game, the system automatically minimizes background tasks and dedicates more resources directly to gameplay. It's a small detail that makes a noticeable difference in how smoothly games run—and for the most part, it works well, although more on that later.

It's worth noting that while the ROG Xbox Ally offers a more unified experience, it still isn't as cohesive as the Valve Steam Deck—and that makes sense. While it faces fewer issues when jumping straight into games, it's still a full Windows PC under the hood, capable of much more than Valve's portable console.

The device will play any PC game you can install. In theory, it can also run Microsoft Office, be used to create content with software like CapCut or DaVinci Resolve, and even capture gameplay. It's essentially a full laptop in a gamepad form factor—and with that kind of versatility, there are moments when the experience doesn't feel like a pure Xbox console. That, it seems, is by design.

What does feel refined is the hardware itself. This is one of the most comfortable handhelds I've ever used. ASUS redesigned the chassis to mimic the ergonomics of an Xbox controller, with handgrips that balance the device's weight in a way that reduces fatigue during longer play sessions.

The placement of the buttons has been rethought as well. An Xbox button sits prominently to the left of the screen, providing one-tap access to an enhanced Game Bar overlay where you can browse your library, chat with friends or adjust settings without fully exiting your game. Two assignable grip buttons on the back add extra input options, though they're smaller and more deliberately positioned than in previous models to prevent accidental presses. It genuinely feels like what you'd expect from a first-party Xbox device, with buttons that deliver a satisfying click and a contoured design that rests effortlessly in your hands.

ASUS has long excelled in display technology, and the ROG Xbox Ally is no exception. It delivers an impressive viewing experience for all types of games. The seven-inch screen runs at a 1,920-by-1,080 resolution with a 120-hertz refresh rate and FreeSync Premium support. Peak brightness reaches 500 nits, a solid range for modern displays, although some screens, such as the Steam Deck OLED, can hit 1,000 nits, easily outshining the ROG Xbox Ally.

That said, the available brightness makes a real difference when playing in well-lit rooms or outdoors, keeping the image crisp and readable without washing out colours. The screen covers 100 percent of the sRGB colour space and is protected by Corning Gorilla Glass DXC, which reduces surface reflections and improves scratch resistance by more than 40 percent.

Audio comes through dual front-firing speakers with Smart Amplifier technology and Dolby Atmos support. The system also includes two-way AI noise cancellation that processes both incoming and outgoing audio during voice chats, filtering out background noise. For those who prefer headphones, there's a standard 3.5-mm combo audio jack.

The sound isn't outstanding, but it's loud enough to handle most game audio or media playback with enough impact that you won't feel like you're missing out. Still, I'd recommend using a good pair of headphones to get the most out of the ROG Xbox Ally. They'll provide better sound overall—and you'll avoid disturbing others if you take the console with you while travelling. That said, credit where it's due: considering the small size of its speakers, the ROG Xbox Ally delivers surprisingly solid audio.

On the connectivity side, the ROG Xbox Ally features Wi-Fi 6E with triple-band support and Bluetooth 5.2. The device includes two USB 3.2 Gen 2 Type-C ports with DisplayPort 1.4 and Power Delivery 3.0, allowing you to charge while keeping a peripheral—such as a headset—connected at the same time. It's a major improvement compared with the original ROG Ally. There's also a UHS-II microSD card reader for expanded storage. The included 65-watt USB-C power adapter handles charging, and the 60-watt-hour battery delivers several hours of playtime, depending on which performance mode you choose.

Much like previous Ally devices, ASUS's Armoury Crate SE software lets you dig deeper into system settings for greater control and customization. Pressing the Command Center button on the left side of the device brings up quick shortcuts for volume, brightness, real-time system monitoring, frame rate limiting and AMD Radeon Super Resolution. Opening the full Armoury Crate SE app reveals options to create custom performance profiles, calibrate controls, adjust RGB lighting, manage Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connections, and configure battery care settings to extend the device's long-term health.

It's also within the Armoury Crate SE overlay that you can enable Performance modes, which control how the device balances power consumption with frame

rates. Silent mode runs at six watts and prioritizes battery life. Performance mode increases power to 15 watts, offering a middle ground between efficiency and speed. Turbo mode pushes output to 20 watts—whether you're plugged in or on battery—maximizing frame rates as much as the hardware allows. There's also a manual mode that lets you fine-tune power settings, with options ranging from four to 24 watts.

Since the ROG Xbox Ally is an AMD-based device, it supports the full suite of Radeon graphics technologies, including FidelityFX Super Resolution and Radeon Super Resolution for upscaling, as well as frame generation tools like FSR Frame Generation and AMD Fluid Motion Frames. These technologies boost performance by rendering at lower resolutions and upscaling the image, or by interpolating extra frames between traditionally rendered ones.

The flexibility to toggle these features on or off gives players more ways to optimize performance for specific games. It's this technology that helps the ROG Xbox Ally punch above its weight class and deliver a surprisingly strong gaming experience for its size, though that performance varies depending on the title and your settings.

> ***"…the ROG Xbox Ally brings together three major players — ASUS, Xbox and Windows — to create something that feels like a true evolution of what came before."***

With the hardware overview out of the way, it's time to look at how the ROG Xbox Ally performs in real-world gaming. I tested a range of titles from multiple platforms, and as with most PC handhelds, it's important to set expectations based on the price.

The ROG Xbox Ally isn't as powerful as the ROG Xbox Ally X, but that doesn't mean it can't handle modern games.

When I jumped into *Doom Eternal*, I averaged a solid 50 frames per second (FPS) at 1080p on high settings. Dropping to 720p pushed that closer to 60 or even 70 FPS, and with a screen this size, the image still looked sharp while offering a smoother frame rate.

That said, when I tried *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*, the game was almost unplayable—even after reducing settings and dropping the resolution to 720p. It hovered around 15 FPS at 1080p and roughly 27 FPS at 720p, even with graphics settings turned down. It's technically playable, but far from ideal for a demanding game like that.

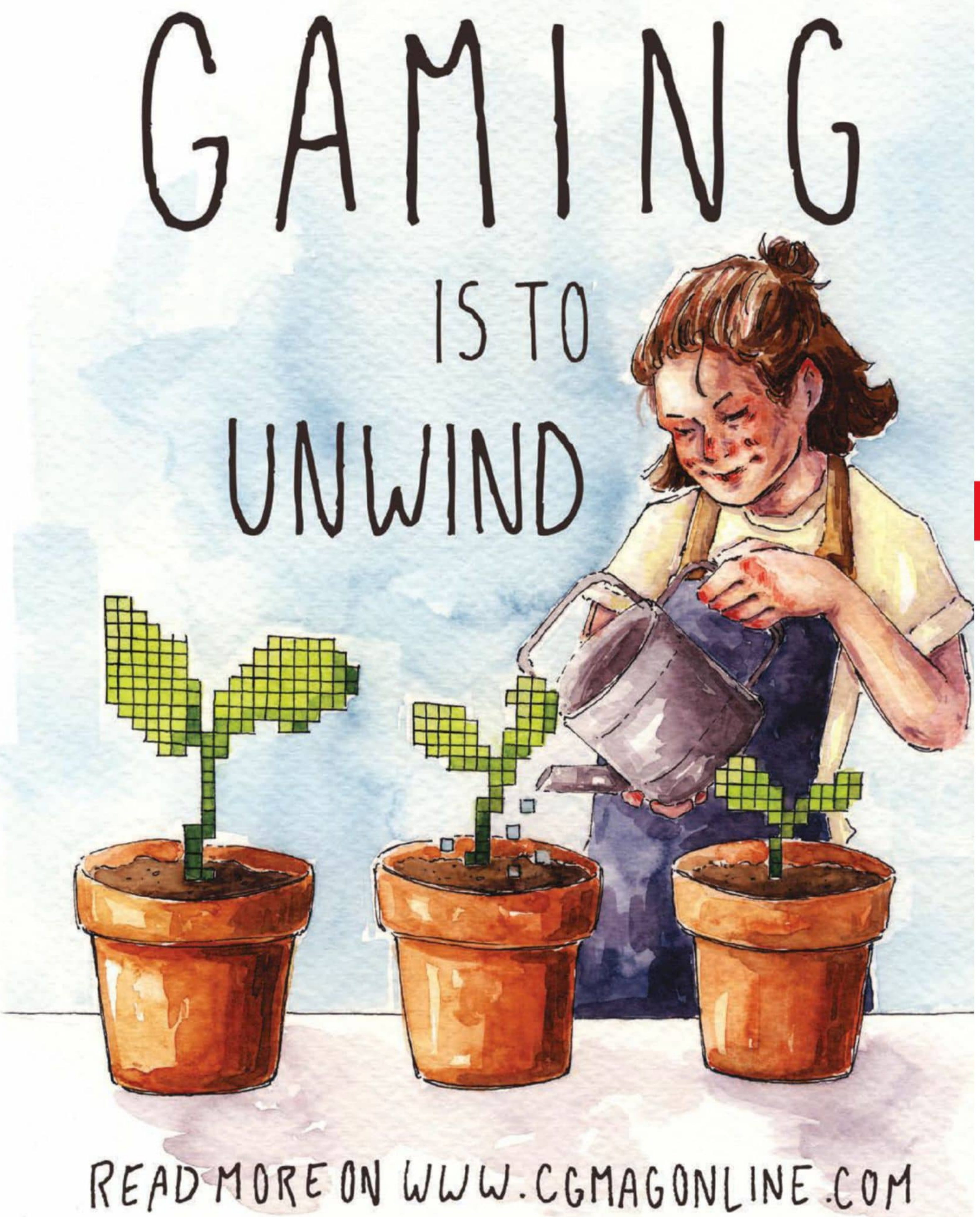
Cyberpunk 2077, on the other hand, was completely unplayable on the ROG Xbox Ally. I managed to load into the game, but it crashed frequently, and when it did run, it barely reached 21 FPS at 1080p. Between the instability and inconsistent frame rates, it wasn't possible to properly test it.

However, when it came to indie and casual titles or AAA games set to low settings, the ROG Xbox Ally excelled. Games such as *Stardew Valley*, *Goat Simulator* and *Fortnite* on low settings ran smoothly with no noticeable performance drops or thermal issues. Even with settings optimized for handheld play, *Diablo IV* maintained well over 50 frames per second at 1080p while plugged in, and over 40 frames per second when running on battery power. The result was a consistently enjoyable experience across multiple runs and dungeons.

The Ryzen Z2 A processor is a smart choice for players who don't need to push hardware to the limit but still want a capable handheld for modern indie and esports titles. It delivers a solid mid-range experience with enough headroom to handle select AAA games, as long as expectations remain realistic. Those who want to play AAA titles or tackle larger games at higher settings should consider the Xbox Ally X. It offers significantly more performance and delivers a better overall gameplay experience.

That's the real story with the ROG Xbox Ally: it's a system designed to hit an accessible price point—and for many players, it will be enough. It can handle a wide range of titles, delivers a respectable battery life of more than four hours when playing casual games, and can even run select AAA experiences, provided they're well optimized. It feels like a solid 720p machine that can occasionally deliver 1080p gameplay depending on the title. Considering it costs only $599 US—$400 less than the $999 US ROG Xbox Ally X—it's a compelling option, especially for those looking for an alternative to the Steam Deck.

The ROG Xbox Ally succeeds by focusing on what gamers want most in a handheld gaming device—and by adding just enough Xbox integration to sweeten the deal. Comfortable ergonomics, a bright and responsive display, flexible performance options and software that stays out of the way all come together to create an experience that feels polished and purposeful. It doesn't try to do everything—but what it does, it does exceptionally well. For anyone looking to play PC games on the go without giving up the console-like ease of the Xbox interface, this device delivers exactly what it promises.



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EDITOR'S CHOICE
8.0

ROG XBOX ALLY X

ROG & Xbox Push to Close the Gap Between Console & PC Gaming

Manufacturer: ROG & Xbox
Type: Handheld Gaming System

MSRP: $999.99
Reviewed By: Dayna Eileen

Handheld gaming devices have seen a sudden resurgence. There are piles of devices at the fingertips of PC gamers, but console gamers have been left out to an extent. Nintendo fans have the Nintendo Switch, PlayStation players have the PlayStation Portal, and now, Xbox gamers have the ROG Xbox Ally series, in my case, the ROG Xbox Ally X.

CGMagazine received both devices in the series, the ROG Xbox Ally and Ally X from Xbox and ASUS. Having looked at the original Ally when it released (and not loving it), and being a regular user of the ROG Ally X (it's how I do all of my PC gaming), plus being an Xbox gamer through and through, this seemed like the perfect device for me. With a couple of weeks with the device under my belt, I can say that rings pretty true, though there are a few caveats. So let's jump in.

First, I want to discuss what is special about the ROG Xbox Ally X. As I said, both other major consoles have their own version of a handheld (well, Nintendo *is a handheld*), so it is high time that Xbox had its own version. However, this isn't exactly an "Xbox handheld", is it? The ROG Ally series is already a well-established line, and the ROG Xbox Ally X allows you to play games across any PC platform available, including Steam, GOG, Epic Games, Ubisoft Connect, EA and more.

This also includes Xbox's PC app, which lets you access Xbox's PC games, PC Game Pass, and your own Xbox library. This is where the caveats to the ROG Xbox Ally X start to show. Game Pass is great, albeit more expensive now, and you need a higher tier to unlock PC Game Pass if you're also an Xbox player.

If you're hoping to play your own Xbox library, that is hit and miss as well. Of over 80 games I have on the Xbox console, only 28 of them are Xbox Play Anywhere. This includes titles like *Starfield, Atomfall, Avowed, Clair Obscur: Expedition 33, Lies of P, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II, Two Point Campus, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered, Magical Delicacy, Discounty* and more.

> ***"If Xbox can bring more Play Anywhere titles to the table, and can optimize them for handheld, the ROG Xbox Ally X will be unbeatable for Xbox gamers."***

Yes, 28 games is still a huge library, but the average gamer may not own quite as many as someone who reviews games for a living, and this is only about one-third of my library. If you're looking for a handheld that plays all your console games, like the Switch or Portal, this is not it. That being said, Cloud Gaming allows for a ton of games to be played, again, so long as you are subscribed and have a stable internet connection.

The ROG Xbox Ally X (and regular Ally) features Wi-Fi 6E, so aside from a corner of my bedroom—which eludes even the best of our devices—I never saw a problem with Wi-Fi connectivity, even during online multiplayer games. It also hosts Bluetooth 5.4, and I was able to pair various controllers, mice and keyboards. My GameSir Cyclone 2 is still not usable for some reason, as it wasn't on the original Ally X either.

I also used the 8BitDo SN30 Pro, the 8BitDo Ultimate, the Razer Orochi V2, the Razer BlackWidow V3 Mini Hyperspeed, and a ROCCAT Kone XP Air mouse. My connectivity was hit and miss, and highly game-dependent, which can be frustrating to those less technically inclined.

The performance on the Orochi, which I used exclusively on the original Ally X, was abysmal. Even after updates, connecting via the Razer Handheld Dock Chroma with the dongle was extremely choppy, making selecting anything on screen impossible and games unplayable. I tried to connect it via Bluetooth, thinking it could be a dock issue, and it couldn't even be found; Razer Synapse didn't see it either. I had to switch to the ROCCAT via Bluetooth, which consistently worked.

The ROG Xbox Ally X features a couple of buttons that you won't find on the original ROG Ally/Ally X as well. First is the signature Xbox button that opens up your Game Bar, allowing you to switch between Armoury Crate, your Game Platforms, settings like your microphone, volume and Wi-Fi network, your Xbox profile, captures and more. You can also long-press the Xbox button to open your task manager, letting you quickly swap between windows or close things down.

Returning buttons include the view button to bring up your library settings, the Armoury Crate Command Center shortcut and the menu button, which has various uses depending on what you're doing at the time. There are also two programmable buttons on the back of the device that allow for "pro controller" options, or whatever you'd like. You can actually remap all the buttons within Armoury Crate, if you want to.

Something I thought was special about the ROG Xbox Ally X is the way you can find and manage your games from the Xbox app. The way I understood things, I was very excited for this feature. As a gamer, I use all the apps I mentioned earlier: Steam, Epic Games, Xbox, EA, etc. This means jumping into Windows 11 and manually opening up each platform when I want to play a game.

One of my biggest complaints when these Windows handhelds began releasing was how ridiculous it felt to navigate these devices on a small touch screen, especially pressing these tiny X buttons to close windows. The ROG Ally X has the ability in Armoury Crate to launch games from various platforms all in one spot. When the ROG Xbox Ally X was first introduced, they were talking about this feature as if it were brand-new. I thought they were implementing the ability to *manage* your games from the Xbox app, not just launch them.

You can do everything you can do with your games in the Armoury Crate games tab, now in the Xbox app. You do still need to access the original platforms to download games, and sadly, you do need to head there to update them as well. Since I initially thought ROG and Xbox were announcing it would now be a one-stop shop once they were downloaded, I was a bit bummed to see you can't even check if updates are needed from this screen. You can uninstall most games from Armoury Crate, though, which is a nice touch for storage management, but you can't from the Xbox app unless it is an Xbox game.

> ***"If you're looking for a handheld that plays all your console games, like the Switch or Portal, this is not it."***

You can decide if you are team ROG or team Xbox by choosing how the ROG Xbox Ally X loads, right into this screen in Armoury Crate, or you can choose the Xbox app if you prefer. Essentially, this is a great new feature if you are a huge Xbox fan and prefer their app, or spend a lot of time with Game Pass and Cloud Gaming. Having them all in the same spot will eliminate the need to open another app.

Something to note about updates, though: even though you can't update from here, launching a game opens the platform in the background as well. So, if you have auto-updates on, in theory, your games should be staying updated if you are a regular user.

Obviously, a major part of what makes a gaming handheld worthwhile is its internals. The ROG Xbox Ally X features an AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme processor, 24GB of LPDDR5X-8000 RAM and 1TB of M.2 2280 storage. For those curious, the chart below shows how it varies from the new ROG Xbox Ally, as well as 2023's ROG Ally and last year's ROG Ally X.

As you can see, there are a few major differences between the four models. The ROG Xbox Ally X is the heaviest of the four models (over 100g from the original Ally). Luckily, the weight is pretty evenly distributed across the device, and it is hardly noticeable. The new Xbox-controller style grip on the device plays a big part here, and makes the device the most comfortable Ally model to date.

What I was most surprised by was the display. I have never had a complaint about how bright or vibrant the ROG Ally series was. That being said, I am pretty shocked that the display hasn't changed in two years. Especially with ASUS, as they release new laptop models regularly, priding themselves on outstanding displays and frequent upgrades. I guess you can't complain about what isn't broken, but it was just something to note.

The ROG Xbox Ally X (and all the others) feature a 7" FHD (1920×1080) IPS touchscreen, which hits 500 nits brightness and has a 120 Hz refresh rate. In practice, games looked beautiful. Visuals were sharp and clear, and I never saw any issues due to the display. My only complaint would be the size of the text in some games, but I could just be getting old. You'll have to jump into individual game settings for that.

Game performance was about what I expected on the ROG Xbox Ally X overall, especially since I've been using the original regularly. I tested 17 different games during my review period, ranging from cute and cozy pixelated titles like *Discounty* and *Fields of Mistria* to AAA titles like *Sid Meier's Civilization VII*, *Diablo IV*, and *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. *Fortnite* was a major part of testing as well.

It is important to remember that this is a handheld system, so expecting extreme-level graphics on a small device while still expecting the battery to survive is pretty unlikely. If you want to play the latest AAA games on max settings, this probably isn't the device for you. That being said, I spent a lot of time fiddling with settings to see what the ROG Xbox Ally X can do.

I tested several games, looking at the frames per second and checking for any stuttering or screen tearing. Unplugged, the ROG Xbox Ally X drops to Performance Mode and then moves into Turbo Mode while plugged in. You can change these settings, but they are ideal for optimal battery life. Each game was tested in handheld mode while unplugged and while charging, plus while docked on my TCL 55" QM6K QD-MiniLED TV with the Razer Handheld Dock Chroma. I tested each game on high and low settings, plus some extra options for games that allowed it.

For a good baseline, I jumped into *Fortnite*. Docked, I was only able to reach around 25 FPS on high settings and between 45 and 50 on low. Both felt playable, even if the graphics weren't as crisp as on my Xbox Series X. For other modes on high graphics settings, *Fortnite* ran around 29-30 FPS while unplugged and 40-45 FPS while plugged in. On low settings, I was able to reach 72-74 FPS while unplugged and 97-115 FPS while plugged in. It was great!

Diablo IV was the next title I spent some time testing on the game's performance mode. Docked, I saw the game sit at about 25 FPS on high, 28-30 FPS on ray tracing high, and 30-43 FPS on low. Handheld mode on *Diablo IV* was impressive, hitting high settings of 58-59 unplugged, ray tracing high in the 50-55 range and low settings of 77-80. Once you plug back in and hit that Turbo mode, these bump to 60-62 on high, 62-65 on ray tracing high, and a whopping 99-103 on low.

Finally, I really wanted to push the system, so I loaded up Game of the Year contender, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. This game is absolutely stunning, but that means it pushed the ROG Xbox Ally X to its limits. Also, putting the game in performance mode for all tests, docked, we only saw 15 FPS on high, and 20-22 on low. It was playable, but not a great experience.

Unplugged, we managed to 35 FPS on low and 26-29 on high.

You should note that taking *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* off of the game's performance mode while unplugged made the high setting numbers drop to the low teens. Plugged in, the low FPS rose to a respectable 45 FPS, and high settings brought us around 38-38 FPS.

> **"That AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme and 24GB LPDDR5X-8000 RAM really make a noticeable difference when you go back to the older device."**

As you can see, we aren't banging out AAA titles on ultra and hitting anything competitive gamers would find acceptable, but that isn't what the ROG Xbox Ally X is for. Would it be nice to play *Clair Obscur* while docked a bit more efficiently? Sure! But I am using Xbox Play Anywhere anyway, so I can just load up my Series X if I want to play on my TV.

My experience with the ROG Xbox Ally X in handheld mode was more than sufficient, especially when I am able to plug in. While unplugged, you notice a performance drop, but it remains a decent experience overall. Even *Civ VII,* which can really stress my laptop, was more than playable, so I am really happy with the performance.

In comparison, I jumped into these games on the original ROG Ally X, which received new updates, and the results were extremely inconsistent. Since I am a console gamer at heart, I usually save my bigger games like *Clair Obscur* and *Fortnite* for my console. My regular Ally X has spent more time with my cozy Steam games.

Trying to run these AAA games on the older system now was less than impressive. Even if I occasionally got frames per second that matched the new ROG Xbox Ally X, movement in menus and load times were noticeably slower, irritating even, after using the ROG Xbox Ally X. That AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme and 24GB LPDDR5X-8000 RAM really make a noticeable difference when you go back to the older device.

I was pretty impressed with the battery life on the ROG Xbox Ally X, too. With my current Ally X, I usually get an average of three hours of play time, depending on what I am playing. For the new device, I ran tests playing *Fortnite* on medium and a slate of cozy games, with my display at full brightness, but all additional lighting off. I was able to get about four hours of battery life under these conditions.

The 80Wh supplies enough power to get you through a pretty good gaming session before needing to plug in. For charging, the ROG Xbox Ally X includes a 65W charger. While not using the device, I was getting about 1% per minute during charging, reaching about 20% in 20 minutes. It isn't groundbreaking, but it is serviceable.

Being a Windows-based device, and ROG getting Xbox on board, I was excited to try out the new Gaming Copilot beta. This isn't ROG Xbox Ally specific, so I won't stay on it for too long, but on the device, getting assistance in games was fast and functional. I had my own little helper chatting with me about *Fortnite,* even commenting on what I was doing in-game. You can read more about Gaming Copilot and how to implement it on your other devices here.

The ROG Xbox Ally X has also promised several features that have yet to be implemented. Xbox has said that players will soon be able to view handheld compatibility directly on supported games' product description pages. These pages will display either "Handheld Optimized" or "Mostly Compatible," and users will be able to filter by these options. As of writing, the feature is not yet available, though it was expected to go live on Oct. 14. Xbox has also stated that it remains committed to making as many Xbox Play Anywhere titles as possible handheld-optimized.

Other features promised in early 2026 include Automatic Super Resolution, using the NPU to upscale games running at lower res and Highlight Reels, allowing AI to capture great gameplay moments. Some system boosts promised include enhancements to the docking experience, like easy controller pairing (I freaking hope so!), optimized display output and more.

> **"That AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme and 24GB LPDDR5X-8000 RAM really make a noticeable difference when you go back to the older device."**

If Xbox can bring more Play Anywhere titles to the table, and can optimize them for handheld, the ROG Xbox Ally X will be unbeatable for Xbox gamers. As I mentioned previously, I have a pretty good slate of games to jump into, and I haven't had any compatibility issues, but—and maybe this is asking too much—I want the ability to play *all* of my Xbox library anywhere. PlayStation has the Portal, which I know has a few caveats too, but the Switch really does master it.

I want to be able to say that the ROG Xbox Ally X has something that no one else does: the ability to merge PC and Xbox gaming, which is something Xbox has been pushing toward for ages. BUT, many of the features available on the ROG Xbox Ally X have been available to me on the Ally X for ages. I already have access to Xbox Play Anywhere and Cloud Gaming.

Here are the big takeaways with the ROG Xbox Ally X handheld,

though: Bringing some Armoury Crate features over to the Xbox app is nice, because now your Game Pass titles, Cloud Gaming titles, Play Anywhere, Steam, Epic and more will all be in one spot. If you're now viewing all your games in the Xbox app, you'll also be able to stay up to date on the social side of things. You lose that in Armoury Crate. You won't see which of your Xbox friends are playing, or what achievements are available. This does become that one-stop shop, just in a different way than I expected.

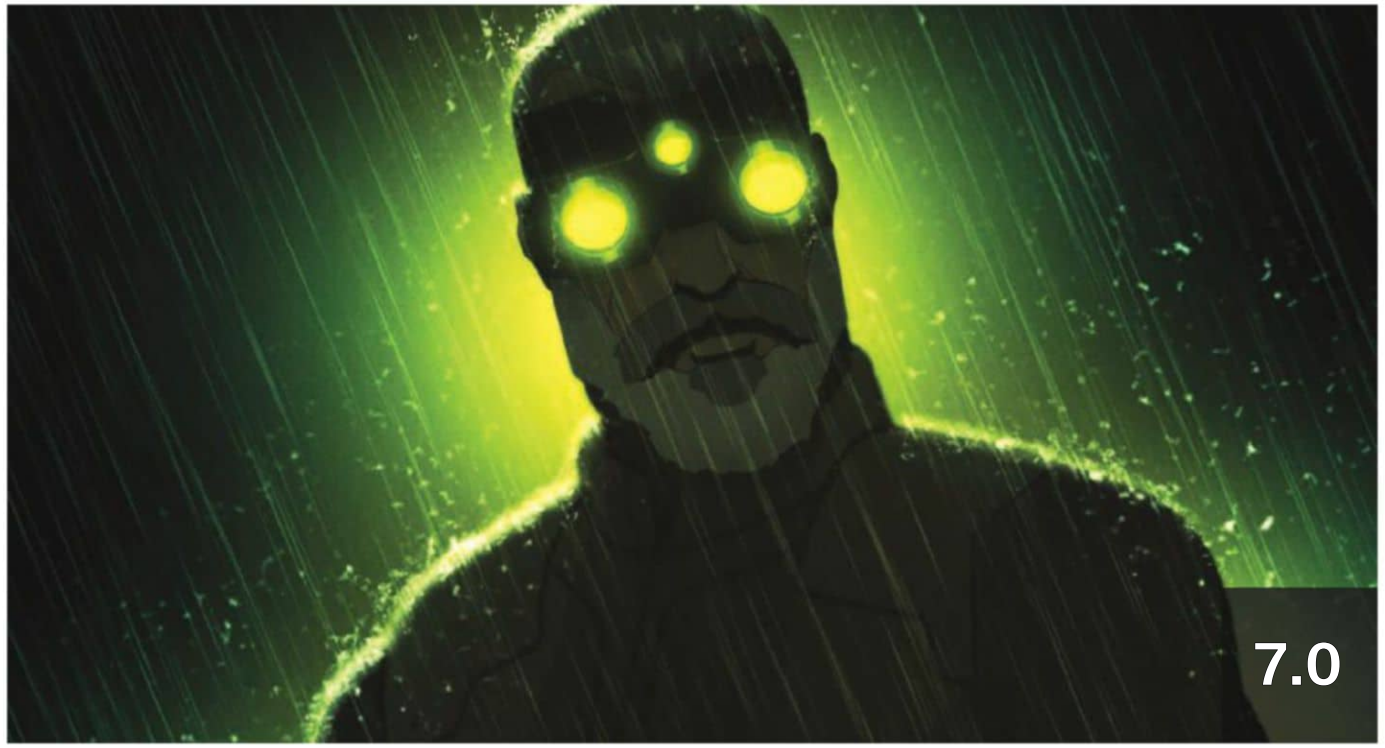
If Xbox gamers are looking for a handheld, the ROG Xbox Ally X makes more sense than any other due to its familiarity. You know the app, you recognize that signature Xbox button and all the menus within it. The ROG Xbox Ally X will offer the smoothest handheld transition for Xbox console gamers, opening up new options with a lot less effort. Is all of that worth the extra $200 asking price over the ROG Ally X? Probably not, but it isn't all you're getting.

Buyers can snatch up the ROG Ally X for $799.99 USD/$1099.99 CAD, sure! But it's last year's chip, last year's performance. The $999.99 USD/$1299.99 ROG Xbox Ally X is going to future-proof you just a little bit more, and Xbox says they are committed to continuing to bring the best experience they can to this handheld. For instance, at an ASUS event last week, their ROG Xbox Ally spokesperson answered someone asking questions about Xbox Quick Resume. The response was along the lines of "We can't talk about it, but we know Xbox players want it," implying that things could definitely be in the works.

I have often seen people argue that the Steam Deck is cheaper, but it is also far more limited. The MSI Claw 8 AI+ is in the same price range, with a beautiful display, but it isn't as powerful. The Legion Go 2 Gen 2 has some great added features, like detachable controllers, but the comparable version is just as expensive. I think we are reaching the point with gaming handhelds where we need to decide not what the most powerful handheld is, but what the right handheld is for our use case or our ecosystem. For me, that's the ROG Xbox Ally X.

I firmly believe that even though the ROG Xbox Ally X is not all that dissimilar from the ROG Ally X, just a touch more powerful with some shiny new buttons, it is still worth it for me and my gaming habits. If I were to purchase a new one today, even at the $200 price increase from last year's model, the upgrade to the AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme chip and 24GB LPDDR5X-8000 RAM, paired with a boost in battery life, would be more than worth it.

Adding in a boost to the Xbox ecosystem that is currently available on the Ally X, like the ability to bypass a lot of Armoury Crate in exchange for the Xbox app, and the ability to see my Cloud titles and more in one spot, is a bonus for any Xbox gamer.



7.0

SPLINTER CELL: DEATHWATCH

A Brutal Spy Thriller, for Better and Worse

Studio: Netflix
Genre: Action, Adventure, Sci-Fi
TV Rating: TV-MA

Premiere Date: 14/10/2025
Number of Episodes: 9
Reviewed By: Brendan Frye

It has been a while since we last saw a dedicated Sam Fisher adventure, with *Captain Laserhawk: A Blood Dragon Remix* offering a brief taste of the character in a Netflix series. But the time has finally come for the legendary operative to come out of retirement in *Splinter Cell: Deathwatch*. Netflix and *John Wick* creator Derek Kolstad have brought the character back, and even in animated form, Fisher still packs a punch. The eight-episode series launched today, October 14th, presenting a darker, older version of the iconic spy voiced by Liev Schreiber, and it delivers on that grizzled spy ich…mostly.

I have to say, I like how *Splinter Cell: Deathwatch* begins: skipping the setup and dropping the viewer right into the action, wasting no time getting things started. The series opens with Fisher living in something close to retirement. When wounded Fourth Echelon agent Zinnia McKenna shows up at his door after a mission goes wrong, he is pulled back into the world of covert operations. What begins as a rescue quickly evolves into a global conspiracy tied to Fisher's past, specifically events from the beloved game *Chaos Theory*. The villains are Diana and Charlie Shetland, siblings connected to Douglas Shetland, an antagonist from that earlier title, so the concept is a strong start that rewards fans of the series with known entities.

Schreiber takes over vocal duties from franchise veteran Michael Ironside, and the transition works better than expected. His gravelly delivery echoes Ironside's iconic performance while adding his own weight to the role. The decision to cast someone new still raises questions, especially since this version of Fisher is closer in age to Ironside than earlier iterations. Netflix has brought back original voice actors for other adaptations, making this choice seem more curious than necessary, but Schreiber delivers a solid performance nonetheless.

The show was animated by Sun Creature and Fost, with directors Guillaume Dousse and Félicien Colmet-Daage leading the project. The results are mixed. While the action sequences deliver fluid, realistic movement and visceral combat, the overall visual style leaves me a little cold. The animation feels clunky and lacks the polish viewers might expect after seeing what Netflix achieved with *Arcane* or *Castlevania*. It gave me *Waking Life* vibes—yes, I'm old enough to make that reference—and no, that's not a good thing for a series based on such a polished franchise. For a property built on light and shadow, *Deathwatch* misses the chance to experiment with something more visually daring.

When *Splinter Cell: Deathwatch* gets out of its own way and dives into the action, it delivers, offering striking and often brutal fights that are sometimes hard to watch—in the best possible way. The combat feels lifted from Kolstad's live-action work on *John Wick*, with clever gunplay and vicious hand-to-hand choreography. The animation team captures the weight and impact of every strike, making viewers wince when knives connect and bullets find their mark. These moments are genuinely thrilling and hint at what the series could have been with a sharper focus.

Having said all that, and while I appreciate what the show brings to the screen, I can't help but feel it's oddly disconnected from what made *Splinter Cell* so engaging and endearing. The stealth gameplay rewarded patience and tactical thinking, but the series opens with one strong stealth sequence before abandoning that approach for standard spy-thriller action. The rest of the season gets bogged down in middling subplots and villain monologues that drain tension rather than build it, with much of the later action favouring direct conflict over the patient, meticulous stealth the character is known for. That's not to say it's bad—it just misses the point of the series in a noticeable way.

McKenna, voiced by Kirby Howell-Baptiste, brings a welcome dynamic to the series. Her blunt, aggressive approach contrasts well with Fisher's calculated methods. The partnership between old and new operatives works, even if the supporting cast around them feels generic. Diana and Charlie Shetland never quite rise to the level of memorable antagonists, and their motivations feel borrowed from every other power-hungry villain story.

Kolstad's script leans too heavily on familiar beats. Remove Fisher and the night-vision goggles, and you're left with a conspiracy narrative that could fit almost any spy franchise with minimal changes. Fans starved for *Splinter Cell* content will find enough here to scratch that itch, but the series lacks the distinctive identity that helped the games become cult classics.

Splinter Cell: Deathwatch falls into the same trap as other video game adaptations, such as *Halo* and *Resident Evil*, borrowing recognizable elements without capturing what made the source material special. I would have much preferred the same attention given to *Castlevania* or *Devil May Cry*—staying true to the core of the franchise while offering fresh, distinctive takes on its characters.

Splinter Cell: Deathwatch is a solid action thriller that happens to feature Sam Fisher—and that's okay. The series captures some of the tense spy moments we've come to expect from Tom Clancy properties, but never quite reaches the high notes or distinctive tone that made the *Splinter Cell* games so special. Strong performances and well-animated combat sequences can't make up for a generic story that never fully embraces the stealth and tension that defined the franchise.

TRON: ARES

Taking The Grid Out

Studio: Disney
Genre: Action, Adventure, Sci-Fi
MPAA Rating: PG-13

Premiere Date: 10/10/2025
Runtime: 119 min
Reviewed By: Ridge Harripersad

Tron: Ares follows Ares (Jared Leto), an advanced program sent from the digital realm into the physical world on a perilous mission, marking humanity's first contact with artificial intelligence beings. Julian Dillinger (Evan Peters) is on the verge of beating ENCOM to the AI punch, in that he can bring a digital item/being into the real world—but only for 29 minutes. The new CEO of ENCOM, Eve Kim (Greta Lee), hopes to thwart Julian's plan by finding Kevin Flynn's original source code, so ENCOM can finish permanently integrating Tron world elements with reality without the time delay.

I went into this 15-year gap sequel with the expectation that the music/score and visuals would drive the entertainment value like its predecessor, but the story would still be iffy—if not, worse. To my surprise, the story was not terrible as it had something more to say. I did not expect to see a second *Frankenstein* film this year! The creator and creature tropes were prevalent in this film, even referencing and quoting Mary Shelley's novel. The film contained a lot of AI exploration, which was troubling but relevant to our current technological climate.

I thought Eve liking Ares and vice versa was both super cheesy and scary. Their flirty conversations reminded me of how more people are interacting with AI companions in real life than ever before. I assumed the movie would have paired Eve and Seth Flores (Arturo Castro) together, with Ares serving as the robot middleman. Instead, it was almost disturbing to see a human go doey-eyed over an AI person.

The overall story was the best the *Tron* movies could do to date, filled with corporate espionage and the ability to bring what you can imagine to life. Every character's motivation was clear in what they wanted to accomplish, and they had a path to follow. It all boiled down to the opposite of what happened in *Tron: Legacy;* what if a program became sentient but was actually a good person? That is all to say, Clu walked so Ares could run into the real world.

> ***"The main reason Tron: Ares feels like the perfect Tron film is that technology has finally caught up with what the series has always tried to visualize."***

Tron: Ares opens with spectacle, delivering an intensely visual and immersive audio experience. As *Tron: Legacy* benefited from Daft Punk's acclaimed soundtrack, *Tron: Ares* gains its edge through Nine Inch Nails, who leave a distinctive musical imprint. Filmed for IMAX, the movie relies heavily on its dazzling light displays, supported by cyberpunk-inspired techno beats. Like its predecessor, it feels less like a conventional film and more like watching a music album come to life on screen.

Despite several elements being either copied or inverted from *Tron: Legacy*, *Tron: Ares* builds effectively on what was previously established. Every *Tron* fan knows about Light Disks and Lightcycles, but this film explores how more creations could exist within the Grid. In a way, this world feels like the original *Minecraft*—only with a stronger cyberpunk edge. Fans will also see a wider variety of vehicles this time, which might have seemed like easy plot devices if they weren't so visually striking.

One of the film's most intriguing ideas is how it bridges the gap between the digital world and reality. The process looks almost like 3D printing the game's elements into existence. With 3D printing now more accessible than ever, this concept fits naturally within *Tron: Ares*.

A clever detail is that Dillinger Systems' printing process resembles real-world 3D printing, complete with support structures visible after production. By contrast, when ENCOM's team attempts to print something from the Grid into the real world, no supports are needed—the digital element materializes almost instantly.

The main reason *Tron: Ares* feels like the perfect *Tron* film is that technology has finally caught up with what the series has always tried to visualize. *Tron: Legacy* was ahead of its time in the story it aimed to tell but lacked the visual sophistication and narrative refinement needed to make it the franchise's best. Both films succeeded with the technology available to them and reflected the technical limitations of their respective eras.

> ***"Despite its flaws, Tron: Ares remains an entertaining watch — and one that leaves me eager to see where this digital world could evolve next."***

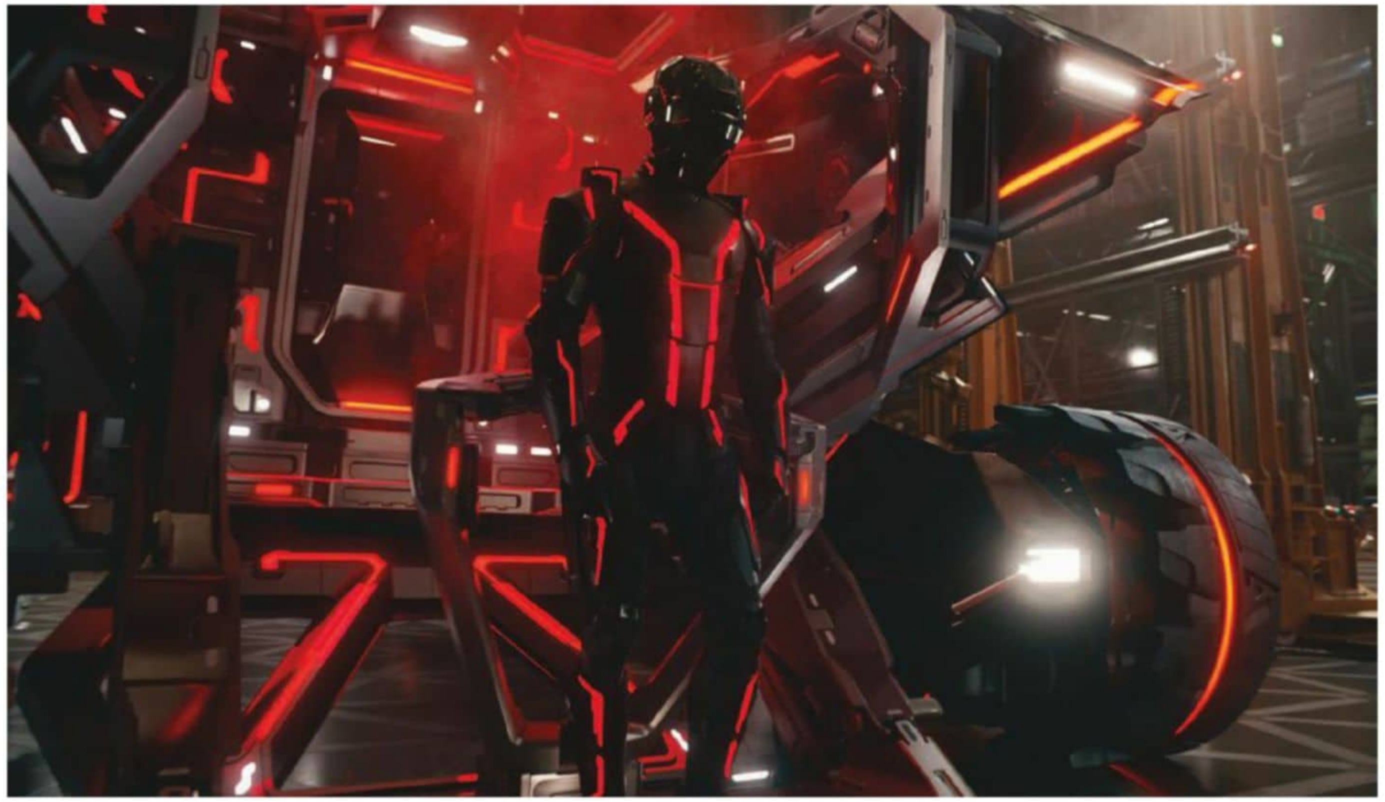
Tron: Ares stands apart because its themes feel timely, arriving during the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. While *Tron: Legacy* served as a warning about the dangers of AI, *Ares* seems to explore its potential benefits. Disney strikes a balance through Athena, who effectively serves as this film's version of Clu, representing what happens when a program rigidly follows its directive.

The film's release timing also works in its favour. It captures a rare "life imitates art" and "art imitates life" moment. Still, the message remains somewhat ambiguous—it's unclear whether the audience is meant to leave feeling optimistic about AI because of programs like Ares.

As for the performances, the cast brings energy and conviction to their roles. Jeff Bridges reprises his laid-back, philosopher-like Kevin Flynn with familiar ease. While the franchise has never been known for deep character writing, the actors elevate the material. Comedian Hasan Minhaj stands out but benefits from having limited opportunities to improvise, allowing Castro's Seth to serve as the true comic relief alongside Eve. The film would have benefited from developing the relationship between Eve and Seth more than the one between Eve and Ares.

Surprisingly, *Tron: Ares* features one of Jared Leto's stronger performances. He fits the role of an artificial intelligence perfectly, landing his comedic beats when needed. Why his hair is perpetually wet in this film remains a mystery. His recent turn as Dr. Michael Morbius in *Morbius* was serviceable, but that film suffered from uninspired storytelling. Here, Leto finally leads a project supported by a more compelling and visually driven narrative.

The film's most distracting issue is its uneven ADR, likely the result of reshoots. At times, Leto's dialogue doesn't match his lip movements, but Peters' scenes suffer most from this problem. In several moments, frequent camera cuts between Castro's line deliveries suggest the editor



or director swapped dialogue in post-production.

Equally jarring are the noticeable blue screen sets, which stand out against the film's otherwise polished visual design. The compositing challenges are most apparent in the Dillinger Systems warehouse sequences, where the actors appear slightly detached from their surroundings. Filming in a real warehouse would have created a more grounded look. This is especially evident because the practical set pieces within the Grid and city scenes appear so refined.

> ***"Tron: Ares is a superbly-executed visual and audio experience, which made up for its technical, story, and lore-building shortcomings."***

The GoPro shots add a welcome sense of realism, effectively capturing the actors performing their own stunts—whether tumbling down a digital building or racing motorbikes through the city. From a cinematic perspective, the GoPro-style approach complements the film's aesthetic. The stunt and fight choreography also deserves recognition, offering the VFX teams some relief during these sequences. Overall, the balance between CGI and practical effects creates a visually engaging experience rather than an uncanny one.

As for *Tron: Ares'* soundtrack, Nine Inch Nails delivers a strong performance overall. Only one track feels out of place—it sounds better suited for a 1990s romantic scene than the intense action sequence it accompanies. The tonal mismatch makes for an awkward moment; if the intent was to heighten tension, it instead drew laughter for how poorly the song fit what was happening on screen. On this point, Daft Punk's work on *Tron: Legacy* remains the stronger and more cohesive soundtrack.

From a broader view of the *Tron* franchise, *Tron: Ares* spends considerably less time within the game world itself. Fans hoping for a deeper exploration of the Grid may feel disappointed. Still, the film compensates with its cyber-espionage elements, high-speed motorcycle chases, and pulse-pounding rhythm that mirrors its techno-driven soundtrack. Despite its flaws, *Tron: Ares* remains an entertaining watch—and one that leaves me eager to see where this digital world could evolve next.

cgm
EDITOR'S CHOICE
8.0

BATTLEFIELD 6

Squad Up And Hit The Battlefield!

Developer: EA Digital Illusions CE
Publisher: Electronic Arts
ESRB Rating: M (Mature)

Release Date: 10/10/2025
Played On: PlayStation 5
Reviewed By: David Walters

I dabble in the FPS genre from time to time, with my FPS career starting all the way back on the N64 with *Goldeneye 007*, and going all the way through Black on the PS2, Call of *Duty: Modern Warfare 2* & *Modern Warfare 3*, to now with *Battlefield 2042,* and the newest entry in the series: *Battlefield 6*. There are others in there too, but they shall remain nameless as they just weren't up to the standards set by previous titles (*cough Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare cough*).

After the highly divisive *Battlefield 2042* (which I have been playing almost to the exclusion of everything else in recent weeks), I wanted to begin by looking at the multiplayer aspect of *Battlefield 6*. With a "don't fix what isn't broken" mindset, the team at Battlefield Studios has taken the best parts of 2042's multiplayer and expanded on them here.

The 4-class operator setup returns in *Battlefield 6*, allowing players to choose from Assault, Engineer, Support, and Recon classes, each with their own weapon and gadgets to choose from as well as their own operator skins to unlock. While each class can choose from any weapon on the rack, players are highly encouraged to choose something that will fill each class's signature trait, a new feature in *Battlefield 6*. These signature traits give players class-specific perks and bonuses that can really make or break a setup.

For example, the Recon signature trait is called Aim-Spot, and it functions by automatically tagging enemy players in the world and on the mini-map for all to see. Not only are you able to now follow players' movements when they go behind cover, but now your teammates can see them as well, which really puts

the emphasis on the Recon-aspect of the class name.

As someone who plays the Recon class exclusively, I adore this trait because it lets me help out my team from afar, especially on those larger maps where I'm staring through a scope, waiting for someone to walk in my field of view.

The other three classes have equally interesting traits, such as the Assault trait, Mission-Focused, which gives players a boost in objective progress and reduces cooldown time for their "in-combat" status, allowing allies to spawn on them sooner. The Engineer trait, Mechanized Infantry, lets players take less explosive damage when near an allied vehicle and prevents those vehicles from being taken over by enemies if all occupants leave. Lastly, and arguably the least useful, is the Support class trait, Squad Supplies, which allows teammates to interact with the Support player to gain health and ammunition.

Brand new to *Battlefield 6* is a new combat system called Kinesthetic Combat. Designed to give the player more control over their movement in the thick of things, Kinesthetic Combat affords players many different combat options when things get hairy: Drag and Revive, which allows the healing player to drag the downed ally to safety before reviving them; Combat Rolls, which let the player limit fall damage by pressing a button at the moment of landing from height to do a forward roll; Mounting Weapons allows players to deploy a bipod onto a piece of cover, limiting recoil and steadying aim.

The biggest factor for me is always going to be the maps. They're the reason I can't get into Call of Duty anymore — they're just too small. There's nothing more satisfying than finding a good elevated spot and landing headshots from half a kilometre away. Much to my delight, there are several large, wide-open maps with excellent sightlines, especially in game modes such as Conquest. Maps like Liberation Peak, Mirak Valley and New Sobek City all scratch that "let's see how far away I can get a headshot from" itch.

Not to worry — for the smaller-map aficionados out there, there's plenty here for you too. Saints Quarter, Empire State and others cater to faster-paced gameplay suited to modes such as Team Deathmatch, King of the Hill and Domination. Learning your corners and ambush points will make the difference between victory and defeat on these maps.

A total of 9 maps, in different variations depending on the game mode, make *Battlefield 6*'s multiplayer experience second-to-none. There really is something for everyone's tastes here, and there is even a returning map from *Battlefield 3: Operation Firestorm* where

SSAULT THE BEACH
Reach the shore
24

players fight over control of a burning oil field in a large-scale battle.

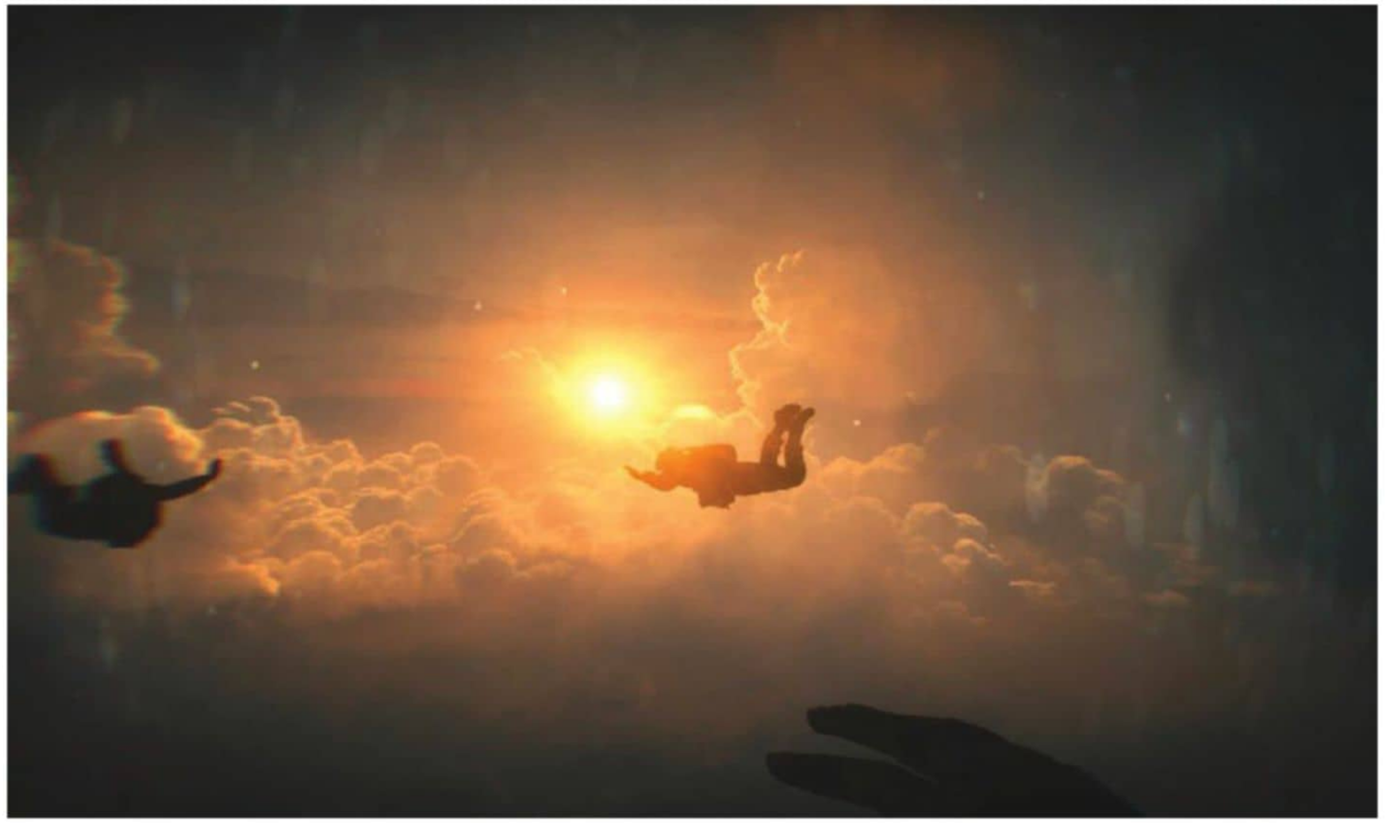
Making its return from *Battlefield 2042*, is a game mode called Portal. A creators dream, Portal allows players to fully customize a map and create new game modes on existing maps as well. Levels of customizability are far superior to what was done in *2042*, *Battlefield 6*'s Portal mode opens the door for NPC Scripting and customized UI for players to make the exact *Battlefield* experience they want to have.

> ***"If you call yourself an FPS enthusiast, then you would do yourself a disservice by missing out on Battlefield 6."***

During my time with the multiplayer portion, I was always excited to see what came next. Learning new maps and weapons and perks is part of the fun, and seeing new strategies and vantage points pop up in real-time, thanks to the destruction of a building, really forces players to think outside the box when attacking an objective. *Battlefield* really is at its best when it's grounded and realistic without being too punishing, and *Battlefield 6* has that in spades.

Moving on to the single-player campaign, I was eager to get into this part as the predecessor sadly omitted a single-player campaign, to the dismay of all *Battlefield* fans everywhere. That said, *Battlefield 6*'s campaign takes place in the very near future (2027-2028, to be exact) and revolves around a rapidly dissolving NATO, a new military organization called Pax Armata, as well as political unrest, and boots-on-the-ground gameplay. Pax Armata is a private military corporation that is boldly unafraid to cross political and international lines to achieve their goals, and the remnants of NATO are all that stand in the way of complete global restructuring.

Battlefield 6's campaign seems to operate on the philosophy that less is more. By that, I mean the campaign packs a lot of events and locations into a relatively short runtime. Spanning nine missions, there's a lot happening — and, to be honest, I like that

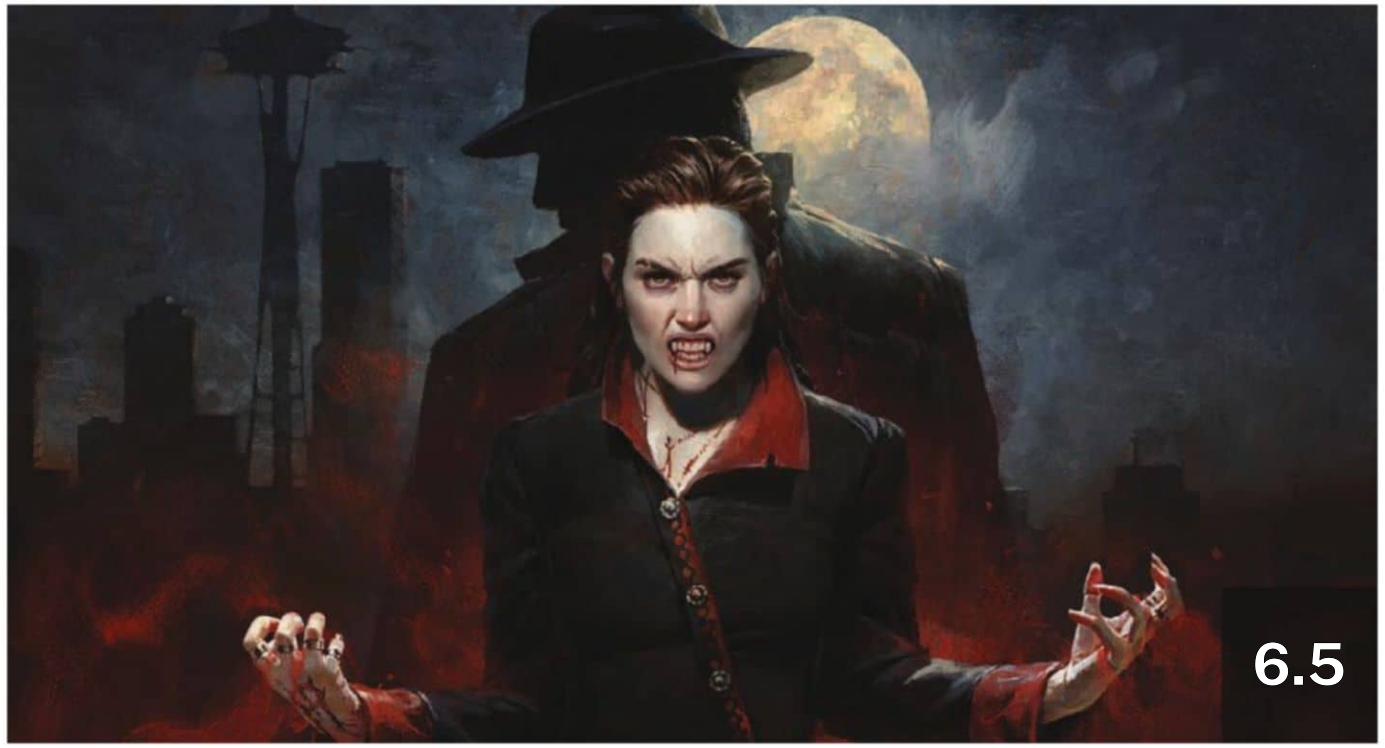


everything feels shoehorned in. It gives the world an urgent, everything-is-awful-and-we-need-to-act-now energy that suits the story. A few collectible dog tags are scattered throughout each mission, and I found myself combing every nearby room and corner for them, simply because I could.

By the end of the campaign, I was finally able to take a breath after a 10-hour journey that took me from one side of the planet to the other — and kicked me in the head a few times along the way.

Could the developers have stretched the story out a bit more? Perhaps. A little more world-building wouldn't hurt, but what's here works to keep the squad — and the player — on their toes. By the time the credits rolled, I wanted more, and not many first-person shooter stories can claim that. Speaking of the credits, there's a wonderful touch: the names of all the babies born during development, as well as the developers' pets, appear in the list. They didn't have to include that, but it's a fun addition that recognizes everyone who contributed to the game, even indirectly.

Whether you play multiplayer exclusively or dabble in the campaign for fun, *Battlefield 6* really is the front-runner in the gritty, grounded, realistic modern war shooter. Are there some kinks to iron out, sure but none of them are so egregious that they become detrimental to the experience. If you call yourself an FPS enthusiast, then you would do yourself a disservice by missing out on *Battlefield 6*.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

A Half-hearted Embrace

Developer: The Chinese Room
Publisher: Paradox Interactive
ESRB Rating: M (Mature)

Release Date: 10/16/2025
Played On: PC (Microsoft Windows)
Reviewed By: Erik McDowell

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 is a sequel to the 2004 cult classic *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*. The original was notoriously janky and unfinished, yet embraced by a devoted coven of goths, ravers, and weirdos. It had a troubled development and had to be brute-forced into existence. Critically, it was well-received despite its flaws, though acclaim didn't translate into sales — *Bloodlines* developer Troika Games shuttered shortly after release. Over time, community patches slowly improved the game, and some of these improvements were later incorporated into official releases. It's best remembered for its promise and atmosphere, but it still requires a strong imagination to appreciate fully.

More than 20 years later, Paradox Interactive has taken up the reins. Fittingly, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2* is janky and unfinished, yet the same coven of goths, ravers, and weirdos will likely embrace it. I know I did. The sequel also had a troubled development, switching hands mid-production from Hardsuit Labs to The Chinese Room, developers of *Still Wakes the Deep*. Like the original, it doesn't fully live up to its promise, but at the very least, its compelling story and entrancing atmosphere give *World of Darkness* fans *something* to sink their teeth into.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 is not the RPG fans have been waiting for. In fact, it's not much of an RPG at all. Half the time, it plays like an open-world action game, letting players stalk, suck, pummel, and glide around a fictionalized Seattle. The other half, though, is a walking simulator where you control an uncharismatic detective as he trudges through the city, reliving his memories.

The game has a split narrative, with each half offering its own playstyle. In the main story, players take to the streets as Phyre, an elder vampire and minor undead celebrity, rudely awakened from a 100-year slumber. To reclaim her peace and goddamn quiet, she must first silence the rumblings of dissent threatening to tear Seattle's vampire underworld apart. Complicating her quest is Fabian, the voice of a slain detective who has taken up residence in Phyre's head.

> ***"When everything clicks, Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines delivers a proper vampire power fantasy."***

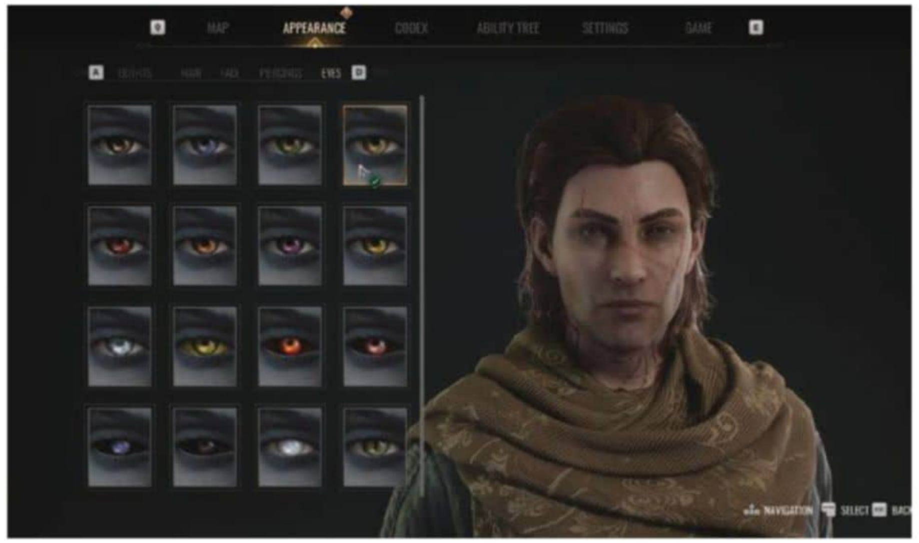
Phyre's sections make up the lion's share of the gameplay. As Phyre, you explore the semi-open world of Seattle, moving between vampire havens and taking on missions that mostly involve trekking across the city to talk to other vampires, fetching mail, or punching people to death. That's about it.

On the bright side, the few things you're allowed to do feel great. Combat and parkour feel very much like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, but in first person. All fights have to happen in the shadows to avoid detection by Seattle's mortals. The constant hunt for shadows adds a thrilling tension to even low-level encounters. Get too brazen with your powers or murder without discretion, and you'll break the Masquerade and be killed on the spot.

Fighting is almost entirely melee, and melee is almost entirely punches: light attack, heavy attack, and a handful of movement-specific variations.

You can pick up and throw objects and fire guns using telekinesis, but once a fight starts in earnest, the only viable strategy becomes backsliding and attack spamming.

Vampires can also use blood magic to injure or manipulate their prey. Each clan offers a unique set of spells tailored to different playstyles — in theory, anyway. Clan choice is one of the few customization options for Phyre, but it quickly loses relevance; as *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2* progresses, all clan spells can be purchased and equipped. Blood magic is fun to wield and allows for some inventive strategies, but clumsy arenas often force confrontations. Blood mana is also costly and can't always be replenished without alerting an entire room of enemies.



Initially, the combat shows promise, but it never evolves. New enemy types appear later, yet button-mashing and limited spell slots keep each encounter feeling flat. By the second hour, when enemies turn into damage sponges, combat devolves into little more than a grind. The same goes for movement. At first, running up walls and gliding across rooftops is exhilarating, but after hours of traversing the same handful of buildings, it often feels easier to choose peace and stick to the streets.

When everything clicks, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* delivers a proper vampire power fantasy. The highlights are its set-piece boss battles, which make the most of the limited mechanics and force you to think fast. It's also rewarding to zone out and just pilot Phyre around the city. They move like a wild animal, and there's a labidinal joy in using their gloriously gory blood magic to annihilate roaming bands of thin-bloods. Unfortunately, that world is populated by brain-dead NPCs, repetitive encounters, and unremarkable locations. Still, it can be fun—if only occasionally.

The same can't be said about Fabian's sections of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*. At the end of each in-game night, when Phyre goes to sleep, the Fabian walking simulator starts to play in her head. Fabian is a goofball 1930s detective retracing his steps through the closing days of his life. The less said about these parts, the better; I don't want to bore you to death. In short, you walk from point to point, sometimes back and forth, to work through unfailable dialogue challenges. It's never a good sign when the developers add a fast-forward button to help with the pacing, but mercifully, we have one here.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 is first and foremost a narrative adventure. It has action and RPG elements, but they're limited enough to feel like window dressing over a linearity that borders on "on-the-rails." Granted, that ride has some interaction—but so do spinning

teacups. Both can be fun, yet both limit you to going in circles while going in circles.

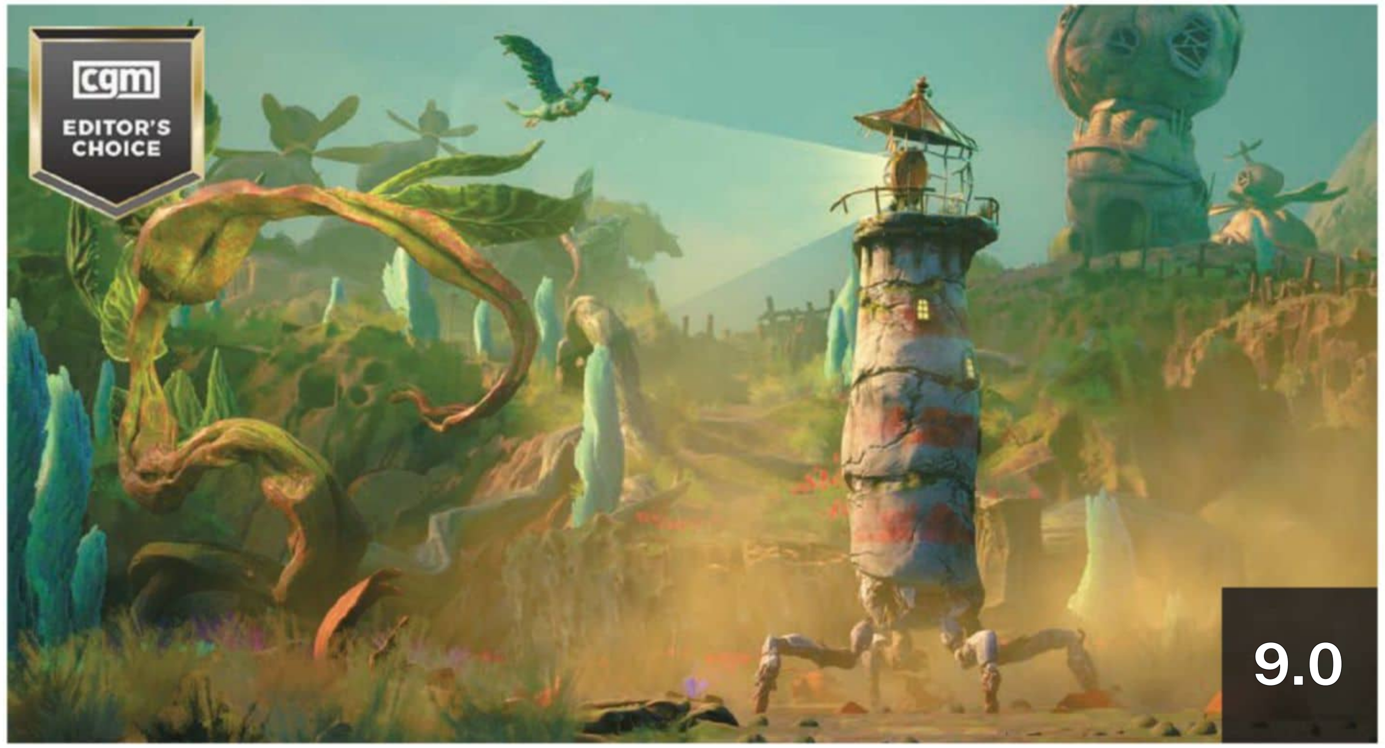
As far as the story goes, it's pretty good. The dialogue and pacing can be a little clunky, but the game consistently adheres to the clan and hierarchy dynamics established in the World of Darkness tabletop games. The overarching narrative and the connection between Phyre and Fabian build toward a rewarding conclusion. The side stories and character interactions, however, don't add much weight to the world and primarily serve as repositories of lore.

You can build relationships and complete sidequests for different clans, but the only payoff is a romantic encounter with your contact. Disappointingly, that encounter is just a black screen and a few saucy lines. Is it out of pocket to demand a more trashy resolution to my vampire romances? I think not.

Like a vampire that missed the neck and hit the belly, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2* is an awkward experience. One fang finds an artery, drawing deep from the universe's lore and mechanics. It fluidly blends inspirations from across gaming to create something unique and bloodily satisfying. The other fang is regrettably lodged in the intestinal tract. That imbalance is inescapable. As vampires, we don't drink with one tooth — if you want a mouthful of the game's sanguine elder-vampire action, you'll have to suck down some bitter pills along the way.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 is for hardcore fans looking for a campy story and a chance to play as their favourite clan. For casual players or newcomers to the *World of Darkness*, its jankiness will likely feel more unfinished than charming. I didn't hate my time with *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*—but I also knew what I was getting into, and I wasn't about to pass up the chance to be a Tremere for a while.

> ***"Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 is janky and unfinished, yet the same coven of goths, ravers, and weirdos will likely embrace it. I know I did."***



KEEPER

Keep On, Keepin' On

Developer: Double Fine Productions
Publisher: Double Fine
ESRB Rating: E10 (Everyone 10+)

Release Date: 10/17/2025
Played On: PC (Microsoft Windows)
Reviewed By: Jordan Biordi

When I first saw *Keeper* at the 2025 Xbox Games Showcase, I wasn't all that impressed by it. If you're familiar with their work, putting up a Double Fine logo before footage of a sentient Lighthouse crawling around on spider legs only to be joined by a strange-looking bird is only going to invoke a "Yeah…that tracks" response.

Keeper didn't stick with me when I saw it, but I stuck with *Keeper* once I started playing it. Jokes aside, its immediate sense of creativity was always going to draw me to it, as I am to examples of video games as art.

But *Keeper* is a game that, despite its bizarre trappings, uses a simple style that is unbelievably charming and incredibly captivating.

Keeper's story is as matter-of-fact as it is imaginative. A strange land is gripped by something called The Withering—separating much of the land and seemingly causing its death. Suddenly, a lone lighthouse springs to life, as if possessed by some ancient magic and is shown a vision of a mountain. As it begins its journey towards this place, it's joined by a strange bird named Twig, and together the two must work to reach the peak and maybe end the Withering.

There's an unrelenting beauty in *Keeper* that's hard not to be gripped by. Creative Lead at Double Fine, Lee Petty, described the creative process that went into the game as one that largely began during the COVID-19 pandemic. This feeling persists throughout the entire game as the story is delivered with no dialogue and no text, leaving it entirely to the player to both experience and interpret.

From the moment *Keeper* begins and the Lighthouse takes its first lumbering steps, you immediately get a sense of the weight and scale of this creature. As you continue, you start to notice the ruins of houses, buildings and human technology, and you begin to wonder what kind of life once flourished on this island.

> ***“There’s an unrelenting beauty in Keeper that’s hard not to be gripped by.”***

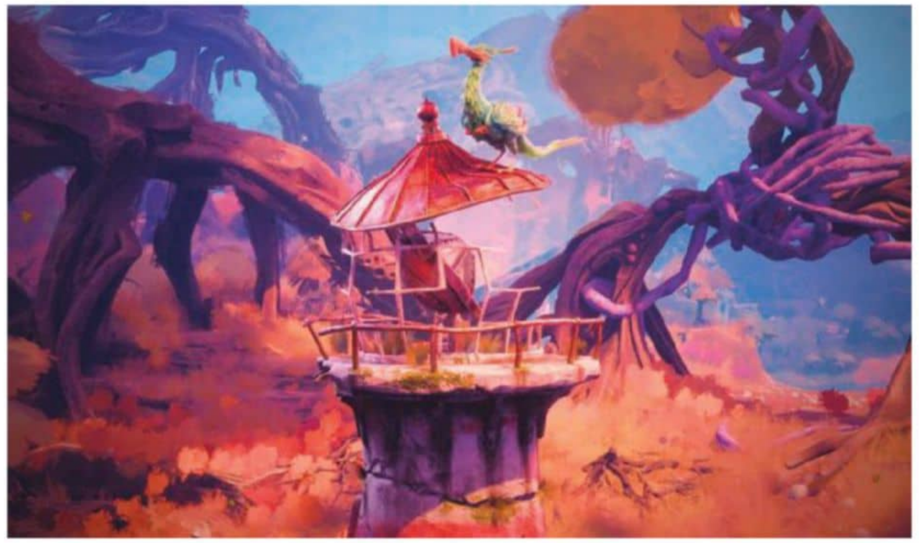
Then you see how shining your light on certain flora causes it to spring to life, and you start to feel that you, as the Lighthouse, are having a real effect on this world. It’s slowly coming back to life as the Lighthouse moves through it and helps its strange new inhabitants. It’s a quietly powerful story that resonates more deeply the longer you play.

Gameplay is fairly straightforward, but genuinely inventive. *Keeper* is effectively a walking simulator that occasionally pauses for light puzzle-solving. Most puzzles involve moving the Lighthouse to a spot and having *Twig* interact with an object or a lever. But the way the game consistently presents puzzles in fun and unorthodox ways is impressive.

One area in particular involves manipulating time to move through an ancient town inhabited by small robots. Certain obstacles can be cleared by reversing time to the distant past, before they ever appeared, or to the far future, when they’ve long since vanished. But there’s a catch: as a living creature, Twig is affected by the time change, whereas the Lighthouse isn’t.

I audibly guffawed the moment I turned back time, and Twig’s limbs shot into its body as it reverted to an egg. I laughed again when I pushed time forward and Twig crumbled to bones, becoming a ghost atop the Lighthouse. Both as an egg and a ghost, Twig proved useful for some fairly simple puzzles, but the sheer breadth of ideas in *Keeper* kept me deeply invested.

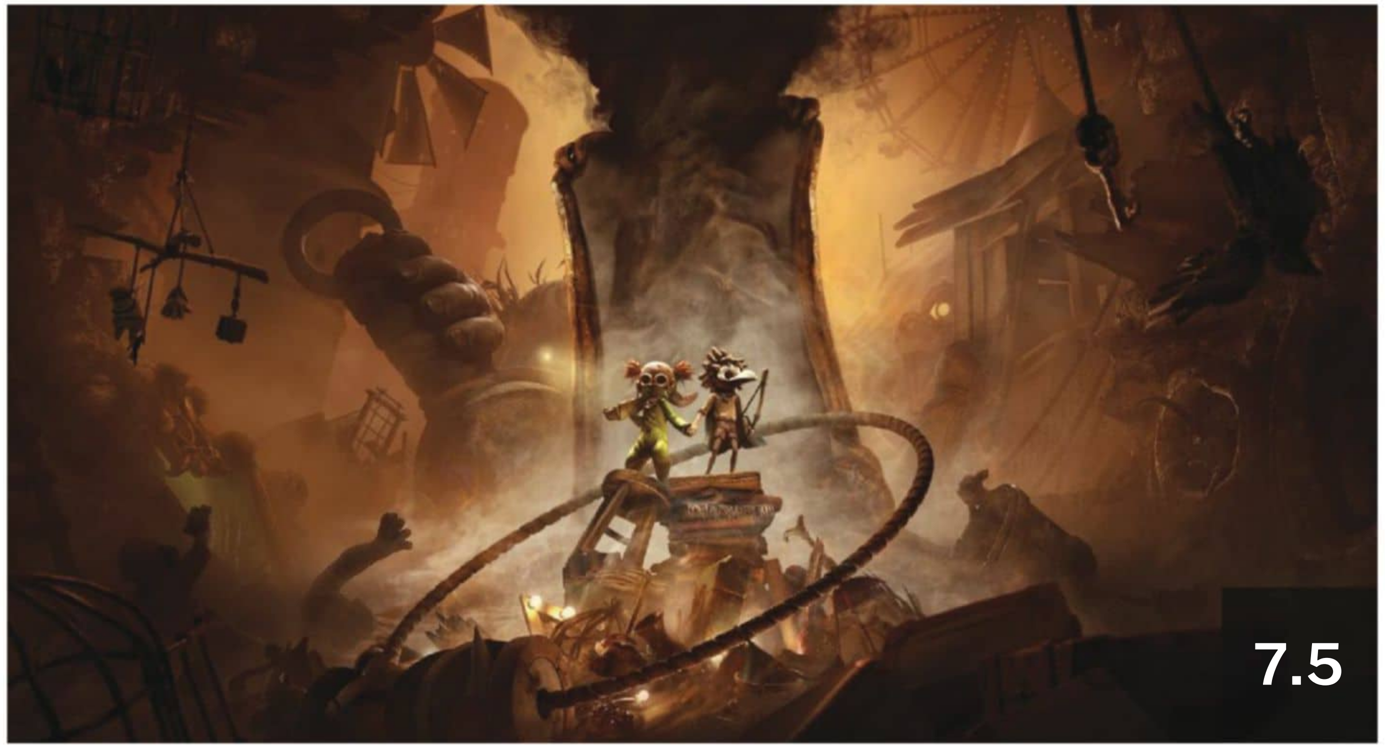
Visually, *Keeper* is stunning. It has that signature Double Fine style with oblong shapes and bizarre designs for environments and characters. At the same time, it uses an almost painted aesthetic, with bold, contrasting colours that make each area burst to life.



Even in its weirdness, there’s an unmistakable charm that makes the world feel genuinely alive.

Where *Keeper* truly shines is in its audio design. The soundtrack is subtle and subdued, adding a sense of dreamlike whimsy to the experience without ever becoming so grand that it overpowers the gameplay. But it’s the way *Keeper* uses sound effects that really makes it stand out. There’s a satisfying crunch to everything that conveys not just the weight and size of the Lighthouse, but also the genuine oddity of its world.

From crushing the forgotten shells of ancient sea life, to the grind of turning gears, to the soft plop of mushrooms emerging when illuminated, every sound feels dense and deliberate. It adds a richness to the world that’s akin to what food critics mean when they talk about mouthfeel. *Keeper* is an absolutely brilliant game that I knew I would end up liking, but was genuinely shocked by just how much. It blends weird with wonderful to create a game that is easy to play and impossible to put down.



7.5

LITTLE NIGHTMARES III

Supermassive Nails the Mood, Stumbles on the Movement

Developer: Supermassive Games
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
ESRB Rating: T (Teen)

Release Date: 10/10/2025
Played On: PlayStation 5
Reviewed By: Marcus Kenneth

Little Nightmares III continues to prove that atmosphere alone can make your skin crawl, but not necessarily pull a game together. From the first step into the Spiral, it’s clear that Supermassive Games understands what makes this series so unnerving, the way scale, silence, and suggestion can turn a world of toys and tools into something genuinely horrifying. Every wall seems to breathe, every hallway feels too long, and every sound from the dark comes a little too close. But that doesn’t mean everything in the Spiral is good.

The premise doesn’t deviate much from what came before. You take control of Low, a small boy with a blue cape and a bow, and Alone, a girl with red pigtails and a wrench. They’re trapped in a place that feels detached from reality, a dreamlike limbo of crumbling fairgrounds, crooked towers, and impossible rooms, all stitched together by the kind of logic nightmares thrive on. The goal, once again, is simple: escape. Getting there is anything but.

Supermassive’s involvement fits the franchise well. Their experience with slow-burn horror and meticulous staging comes through in how *Little Nightmares III* looks and moves. Every camera angle feels deliberate, guiding your eye to what’s important without spelling anything out. The world is gnarly and beautiful in equal measure. Every object feels hand-built from the remnants of something human. It’s an incredible piece of visual design, and one that balances the haunting blend of childish wonder and adult dread that defines the series.

It’s a world meant to be felt more than understood. There’s still no dialogue, no exposition, and no handholding. Instead, *Little Nightmares III* lets its spaces tell the story. A toppled chair beside a wall of tiny handprints. A nursery full of melted dolls. A carnival booth lit by a single flickering bulb. Each area tells you something about what used to be here and what went wrong without ever saying it out loud. The art direction and sound design in *Little Nightmares III* work in perfect sync, and few studios pull it off this well.

But while the presentation has evolved, the gameplay still struggles with old habits. *Little Nightmares III* is a game of trial and error, where you learn what to do by dying. It's baked into the DNA of the series, and sometimes it works, especially when you finally make it through a tense chase sequence by the skin of your teeth. But when combined with sluggish movement and stiff platforming, it can wear thin fast. Low and Alone move like they're half-frozen in fear, and while that slow, deliberate motion helps sell the tone, it also makes the simplest actions, like climbing, jumping, and pushing boxes, feel unnecessarily sluggish.

The co-op focus adds another layer of complexity, for better and worse. You can play online with a friend or solo with an AI partner, and the design smartly leans into teamwork. Low uses his bow to cut ropes or activate distant switches, while Alone's wrench can smash weak spots or crank open machinery. The best moments are the ones where you're forced to rely on each other, timing a jump as one character holds a switch, or calling out to distract an enemy so the other can sneak by. When these sequences click, the tension feels organic and cooperative in a way that fits the series beautifully.

Unfortunately, that dynamic doesn't always hold up, especially when playing solo. The AI partner behaves well most of the time, but there are moments when the illusion completely falls apart. Early in my playthrough, during a fuse-light puzzle, my partner got stuck behind me and brushed against a swarm of bugs. They instantly went down, forcing me to restart from the last checkpoint, which, in this case, sent me several minutes backward.

Later, during a second phase of that same puzzle, I got caught near a fan and died. Instead of respawning at the start of that second section, I was brought all the way back to before I'd even collected the first fuse. Losing four or five minutes of time when the movement and AI can be sluggish and problematic really made me dread replaying certain sections.

These moments break the flow in a way that's especially noticeable in a game built on atmosphere. Every time you're forced to redo puzzles or repeat slow climbing sections, the tension drains out. Instead of feeling haunted, you start feeling impatient. That's the danger of trial-and-error design in a game that moves this deliberately; every repeated section feels slower the second time around.

It doesn't help that the puzzles themselves can fall into a repetitive rhythm. You'll move boxes to reach higher ledges, turn cranks to open doors, or push objects into place over and over again. There are occasional flashes of change, especially when the environment gives you a new tool to play with, but losing them after a time feels less like progression and more like being punished. The series' charm used to be how every new area felt like an entirely different kind of nightmare. Here, the repetition dulls that edge a bit.

That said, *Little Nightmares III* still nails its tone. The sense of scale is unmatched. Two small children pushing against a giant door feels genuinely monumental. The animation work sells that fragility perfectly. Low and Alone don't move like heroes; they scramble, hesitate, and flinch at sounds. It makes every success, every narrow escape, feel earned. And when the world finally does quiet down for a moment, it gives you just enough time to notice how unnerving the silence is.

Supermassive also deserves credit for maintaining the personality of the series while layering in its own touch. Their cinematic sensibilities show through in the pacing and camera work, but they never let it turn into one of their trademark choice-driven thrillers. This still feels like *Little Nightmares* is intimate, eerie, and wordless. It just also happens to be more collaborative, for better or worse.

Technically, the game runs well overall. Playing on the PlayStation 5 Pro, the visuals were really good, with richly detailed textures and the kind of lighting that makes every location come to life in the grotesque way that *Little Nightmares* is known for. Performance stayed consistent throughout my playthrough. Outside of some AI forced reloads where they would get stuck on ladders and checkpoint reloads feeling longer than they should be, as the screen slowly fades in as the characters slowly stand up, it feels like a little bit of added punishment for the game's trial-and-error system.

By the end, *Little Nightmares III* feels like a contradiction in the best and worst ways. It's one of the most beautifully unsettling games of the year, and it continues to prove that few series do atmosphere this well. But that artistry is constantly bumping against clumsy mechanics and inconsistent pacing. You'll spend as much time appreciating the world as you will fighting with its systems.

> ***"The art direction and sound design in Little Nightmares III work in perfect sync, and few studios pull it off this well."***

It's hard not to admire what Supermassive and Bandai Namco have built here. The Spiral is a haunting, unforgettable place, and exploring it, even with its frustrations, is something that I will remember for a long time. But it's also the kind of experience where your patience gets tested just as often as your courage.

For all its flaws, *Little Nightmares III* is still a memorable return to one of horror's most visually distinctive worlds. It doesn't reinvent the formula, and sometimes it gets lost in its own repetition, but when everything aligns, when the music swells, the camera pulls back. Something impossibly large shambles into view. It's clear that no one else makes nightmares quite like this.

cgm
EDITOR'S CHOICE
8.5

NINJA GAIDEN 4

The Cutting Edge

Developer: Team NINJA
Publisher: Koei Tecmo
ESRB Rating: M (Mature)

Release Date: 10/19/2025
Played On: Xbox Series X/S
Reviewed By: Philip Watson

No holds barred. This is a phrase used in many wrestling matches, and even more situations in real life when the odds are stacked firmly against you. It can also be used to describe the entire experience that is the *Ninja Gaiden* franchise.

Since 2004, the revamped 3D action series *Ninja Gaiden* has been delivering high-octane, no-holds-barred action, complete with a storyline steeped in demonic cults and never-ending waves of enemies to mow down. This is all topped off by a Dark Dragon God that just won't stay defeated, and a main character that exudes God-like confidence, Ryu Hayabusa. It has been nearly 13 years *since Ninja Gaiden 3* graced consoles globally, and in the year 2025, *Ninja Gaiden 4* is here.

What's different about the newest instalment in the franchise is that it's co-developed by Platinum Games and Team NINJA. Their collaborative effort has accomplished with the fourth instalment what the previous titles have delivered, and it's safe to say *Ninja Gaiden* has returned.

Ninja Gaiden 4 brings the no-holds-barred intensity brought by the previous three titles in the franchise, complete with a new protagonist that explores the duality of good vs. evil, and a storyline that is very Ninja Gaiden. *Ninja Gaiden 4* is a return to form after its nearly 13-year hiatus, bringing another fast-paced action title to the forefront of gaming. In a sea of the now-popular Souls-like and open world titles, *Ninja Gaiden* has never looked better.

Ninja Gaiden 4 starts just like every other *Gaiden* with the Dark Dragon. The Dark Dragon God's husk (defeated again by Ryu Hayabusa) has been causing intense acid rain over Tokyo, and after his defeat, the world of *Gaiden* is in disrepair. The defeat of the Dark Dragon left behind a colossal carcass, and the alive-seeming husk rains over Tokyo. This poisonous carcass shedding makes the city uninhabitable, and it's a perfect setting for a ninja to stretch their legs. You take on the role of Yakumo, a young member of the Raven Clan, an up-and-comer climbing the ranks, and most certainly not Ryu Hayabusa.

After getting behind the sticks of Yakumo, it's made abundantly clear that the collaboration between Team NINJA and Platinum Games has not staggered game design. Movements feel crisp, precise, and deliberate, making combat and traversal gameplay in *Ninja Gaiden 4* the smoothest it has been since *Ninja Gaiden 2*. Unlike previous titles in the series, *Ninja Gaiden 4* takes place under the carcass of the Dark Dragon in Tokyo, and there aren't any other famous locations or landmarks to visit. The newly transformed Tokyo features a cyberpunk-like aesthetic with striking futuristic design choices that make everything feel larger than being contained to one city.

Yakumo's journey has him remove seals from the Dark Dragon God to free the evil from captivity. In *Ninja Gaiden 4*, your force of good is seeking a way to end the reign of the Dark Dragon God for good, and as Ryu Hayabusa has proven in every adventure since, using the fang and eye of another Dragon deity (the True Dragon Sword) is not the answer to this question.

Like *Devil May Cry 4*, the switch out of Ryu to Yakumo is a little jarring, but Team Ninja and Platinum Games did this by design. Ryu Hayabusa is a gaming legend, so the development team wanted to introduce a fresh new face for new fans to grow alongside, and I dig it.

Unlike Ryu Hayabusa's clean cut and calm demeanour, Yakumo sports a demonic half-Hannya mask showcasing the duality between a master ninja and one that's still rough around the edges. These design choices show thoughtful consideration of the tribulations Ryu has faced. It also shows a stark difference between the rival Hayabusa and Raven clans.

Including such a visual contrast in main character design is an in-depth move that explores more than just 'here's a fresh face.' Yakumo is a welcome addition, and instead of forcing the issue, the collaborative effort between Platinum Games and Team NINJA eases him into the narrative, giving the newcomer a group of new team members very much like Ayane, Rachel and Sonia from the trilogy before to flesh out his team.

> **"Ninja Gaiden 4 is a return to form after its nearly 13-year hiatus, bringing another fast-paced action title to the forefront of gaming."**

Although the 'main character' of the series takes a backseat (similar to how Solid Snake rolls out the red carpet for Raiden in *Metal Gear Solid 2*) after the first few encounters with human enemies, there's no mistaking that *Ninja Gaiden 4* is undoubtedly a return to form for the franchise. Everything that made the high-octane action of *Gaiden* great returns in a new way for *Gaiden 4*. Yakumo comes equipped with dual-wielded katanas, and he's able to make short work of adversaries with shinobi skill. While mid-fight, the sharp blades of Yakumo's katanas can cleave a limb off an enemy, leaving them open for an obliteration technique.

Ninja Gaiden fans will know what this means, but for those of you who don't, an obliteration technique in *Ninja Gaiden* is the equivalent of the overkill present in *Mortal Kombat* fatalities. In *Ninja Gaiden 4*, one of the limbs you can sever to set up an obliteration technique is the head, so after removing an enemy's head, you can still perform an obliteration technique in an awesome display of power. This gross overkill is exacerbated by the blood that coats Yakumo's Gi, and while running around a stage, you're often soaked in the viscera of many enemies.

There's a reason behind all the bloodshed and overkill in *Ninja Gaiden 4*. The more you cover the ground—and Yakumo himself—with your enemies' blood, the more you power the game's newest mechanic: Bloodbind Ninjutsu. Unlike the Hayabusa clan, the Raven clan can use Bloodbind techniques not only to change the state of Yakumo's weapon, but also to unleash even more destruction on the enemies you face. These combat maneuvers are not only effective, but they also add a new strategic layer that previous titles lacked. At times, I felt like a powerful hedge shredder cutting through the hordes of *Gaiden*.

When enemies launched an unblockable attack, I was able to quickly transform my dual katanas into a massive Bloodbind Odachi, cleaving foes with little effort. Using an obliteration technique in Bloodbind mode can split enemies straight down the middle, rapidly filling the Bloodbind gauge. In *Ninja Gaiden 4*, the bloodier you are, the stronger you become. The more overkill you inflict, the more effectively you can chain regular and Bloodbind moves into combos that paint the floor red.

Yakumo has a suite of weapons to dispatch enemies, and each one features a Bloodbind form that feels satisfying to wield. You can switch between them at will during combat to set up devastating combos—and even more powerful Ultimate Techniques.

All classic *Ninja Gaiden* moves return. Yakumo can activate Ultimate Guidance to trigger Ultimate Techniques. He can also use the flying swallow to decapitate enemies in a single sweep, and the Izuna Drop makes its comeback with brutal effect. Fans of previous titles will feel right at home with *Ninja Gaiden 4*, even with its new protagonist.

Ninja Gaiden 4 is at its best when the shackles are taken off the player. When hordes of enemies come at you, and you continuously cut them down with stylish combos and obliteration techniques. This increases the stage score, and just like the Ninja on screen, it's easy for the player to become steeped in the bloodlust, hitting a rhythm of sliding from enemy to enemy, overwhelming them with powerful combinations. The development and design team took special care to break up this monotony by throwing a few curveballs into combat, making each encounter a lesson to not get comfortable.

Enemy salad is always on the menu. A heavily armoured foe might charge in, a giant fiend could crash the party, and rocket-launching soldiers often arrive just in time to ruin the fun. It's up to the player to stay alert during these encounters, which deliver a massive adrenaline rush. When I triumphed over the harder waves, I truly felt like a Master Ninja.

Bloodbath Kills are the ultimate technique in *Ninja Gaiden 4*. After entering Berserk state, Yakumo can use his arsenal to eliminate non-boss enemies in a single swing. The screen shifts to a stylized red-and-black palette to signal a successful kill, and Yakumo can keep using Bloodbath Kills until the Berserk state ends. He can also unleash a screen-clearing move at the end of this state, cleaving nearly every enemy in view. *Ninja Gaiden 4* delivers a real sense of power.

This is a phenomenal return to form for the franchise after 13 years, though a few rough edges remain. Some traversal segments, like those that let Yakumo glide between areas, slow down the momentum. These sections feel clunky, and you'll likely hit one or more walls in frustration. Thankfully, unlike my experience with the preview build, these moments are now generously stocked with checkpoints, meaning you're rarely sent back to the beginning. While they still disrupt the pace, the final version softens the blow.

Another issue is that each stage includes a range of collectible items, yet every doorway acts as a point of no return. In other words, once you pass through a doorway, you can't backtrack—unlike in previous titles. While *Ninja Gaiden 4* encourages exploration, its score system penalizes players for taking their time. This creates a constant sense that you're missing something, and that unease lingers throughout each stage.

Unlike Ryu Hayabusa's Life of the Gods items in earlier games, Yakumo must collect two different items to extend his maximum health. By the end of the game, I had four of one type and none of the other. This left my health bar far lower than it should have been. If the game had simply used one item, as it did in the past, this frustration could've been avoided. It felt like an unnecessary complication—though it may be a minor gripe unique to me.

Ninja Gaiden 4 is a phenomenal return to a beloved franchise. Everything about it feels undeniably *Ninja Gaiden*—from the pulse-pounding metal soundtrack that drives you forward as you slice through enemies, to the massive, multi-phase boss fights that throw the kitchen sink at you. At a certain point in the story, fans will even get to play as the legendary Ryu Hayabusa. Taking control of the "Super Ninja" feels like coming home—like clasping an old friend you haven't seen in years. *Ninja Gaiden 4* marks a powerful return for a franchise that never should have gone silent, and fans can rest assured: this is the true way of the ninja.

cgm
EDITOR'S CHOICE
9.0

THE OUTER WORLDS 2

Smarter, Tighter, and Unexpectedly Sincere

Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Publisher: Xbox Game Studios
ESRB Rating: M (Mature)
Release Date: 10/24/2025
Played On: PlayStation 5
Reviewed By: Marcus Kenneth

It's funny how returning to a familiar universe can feel both comforting and brand new. *The Outer Worlds 2* opens with a banger of an intro that reminds you what made the first game special, while getting out in the open, things have changed in significant and meaningful ways. From the opening scenes, it's obvious that Obsidian looked hard at what worked before, what didn't, and then rebuilt almost every piece with more confidence and heart. The first *Outer Worlds* was clever, stylish, and packed with sharp satire, but it sometimes felt torn between being a shooter, an RPG, and a send-up of corporate dystopia. The sequel doesn't have that identity crisis. It knows what it is: a more mature, emotionally grounded story set in a universe that finally feels alive.

What caught my attention right away wasn't the shooting or the shiny visuals. It was the tone. There's a weight to the writing this time, a sense that the team wanted to say something beyond the punchlines. The jokes are still there, and if anything, land better, but they hit because they aren't thrown in your face all the time. The crew you meet aren't just colourful archetypes or delivery systems for quips; they're people who second-guess themselves, who regret things, who break a little when they think no one's watching. Each companion's story feels carefully written to matter, and that care shows. I found myself hesitating at choices not because I was chasing a better outcome, but because I didn't want to disappoint someone who'd earned my trust. That's a kind of emotional connection the first game never quite reached.

That shift in tone ripples through the story. Corporate greed and bureaucracy still loom large over everything in *The Outer Worlds 2*, but they're no longer the main event. Instead, they are more of a backdrop for something that can matter…depending on how you play. It's more about personal stories, about how people cope when the system stops pretending to care. It's less "look how funny capitalism is" and more "look what it does to the people caught inside it." In your face, mockery is less abundant, and it really helps the overall tone of the whole game. The result is a story that cuts deeper, with fewer loud, ironic moments and more that quietly hurt. It's a more subtle evolution, but it gives the game a sense of purpose that lingers through all the player choices.

And the biggest surprise? It plays great. The first game's combat always sat in that weird middle ground, too clunky to feel like a shooter, too light to feel like a proper RPG. Obsidian nailed it this time around. The gunplay has weight between different guns and tools, and movement feels much smoother. Fights forcing you to think on your feet instead of hiding behind cover until the coast is clear also help. The pacing between exploration, dialogue, and combat feels balanced in a way the original never fully managed.

The reworked time dilation mechanic, the game's spin on slow motion, adds real variety. You can still freeze time to pull off perfect shots, but now gadgets expand what that ability means. One device lets you manipulate electrical systems, another reveals invisible enemies, and one even helps you move through hazardous areas alive. Each of these tools feeds back into exploration, giving you reasons to revisit old areas and discover new ways to interact with the world. It's that rare sequel that starts leaning toward immersive sim territory, rewarding curiosity and improvisation instead of forcing you down a narrow path.

Exploration has always been one of Obsidian's strengths, and *The Outer Worlds 2* shows why. Each planet feels alive, built around an idea that incorporates what the universe and corporations in this world would be doing in the biomes. You'll wander through a mining frozen wasteland that feels like it is slowly dying, an earth-like wild west planet that is run head to toe with greed and everything in between.

That sense of discovery is amplified when your companions share their thoughts about finding the new location or if they have a history with it. Their banter feels more natural now, less like scripted interruptions and more like actual conversations between people who know each other or, in most cases, are getting to know each other. They react to what's happening, to your decisions, even to the places you visit.

Swap out your crew and missions can play out differently, both narratively and mechanically. Better yet, finishing a companion's personal story doesn't just give you closure; it affects gameplay. They might unlock a new perk, change how they behave in combat, or even challenge your choices later. That integration of story and system feels organic, and it's a big part of why this sequel feels more cohesive.

> ***"I went in expecting a slightly refined sequel; I came out feeling like I'd played something that finally reached its full potential."***

Late in my playthrough, I realized I'd completely missed one recruit. It actually bothered me, not because I wanted a full party or a trophy, but because I'd missed someone's story. That's a testament to how grounded these characters feel.

The quest design once again shows Obsidian's pedigree for great world-building. Choices are less about morality bars and more about nuance. You'll rarely see a clean "good" or "evil" option; instead, you're weighing compromises and really looking for the best grey area outcome unless you decide to swing wildly one way or another. Even the smaller missions carry unexpected depth and add to the overall world when it comes to making big choices. Sometimes I had extra dialogue options open up because of some info I found out during these side quests.

If there's one place where *The Outer Worlds 2* still stumbles a bit, it's weapon progression. The shooting feels great, but once you find a setup that works, there's not much incentive to change it. I found a rifle early on that felt perfect, and nothing I picked up afterward topped it. There's plenty of variety in energy guns, grenades, and experimental prototypes, but most don't fundamentally change how you play. It's not a dealbreaker, but in a game where so much else evolves, the static weapon balance stands out.

Technically, the game's solid. Load times are quick, frame rates hold steady, and the art direction keeps that retro-futurist charm intact. The lighting work in particular does a lot of storytelling. There's something eerie about how certain areas glow, how shadows pool in corners, how even your ship feels alive under flickering lights. It's not trying to outshine AAA visual showcases, but the consistency

and polish here stand out. It just looks and feels right.

What ties everything together is how cohesive it all feels. The first *Outer Worlds* sometimes felt like a handful of good ideas vying for attention. This one feels unified. Combat, exploration, dialogue, and character moments all feed the same creative vision. You can tell Obsidian finally had the time and freedom to make the game they wanted. Even small touches, the way the camera lingers just long enough during emotional scenes, or how your crew naturally interacts back on the ship, show a confidence that wasn't always there before.

The humour lands better, too. The first game often undercut its emotional beats with one joke too many. Here, the writing knows when to hold back. The comedy comes from tone and timing rather than constant punchlines back to back. I found myself still laughing at absurd corporate slogans and weird propaganda posters, but I also find myself pausing when a character admits something quietly devastating. It's still satire, but it's not afraid to be sincere, where the first game almost felt like it had to have some form of joke every two minutes.

> ***"What caught my attention in The Outer Worlds 2 right away wasn't the shooting or the shiny visuals. It was the tone."***

There's a moment, a few hours in, when everything just clicks. You've built your crew, shaped your character, and finally understand what kind of person your decisions have turned you into. Sure, there is a sense of urgency in saving the galaxy, but it's about the people who have to live in it and how they will be after we are done with it and have to live with our choices. That's when I realized this sequel isn't trying to reinvent anything, except build out a more believable and lived-in world. The maps aren't bigger, but they're more fleshed out. The choices aren't endless, but they matter more. The tone is sharper, the performances more grounded, and the writing more self-assured.

If there's a word that sums it all up, it's "clarity." It's no longer poking fun at a corporate hellscape; it's exploring what it means to exist inside one. That shift makes *The Outer Worlds 2* more personal, more fun, and far more memorable. I went in expecting a slightly refined sequel; I came out feeling like I'd played something that finally reached its full potential.

Even after dozens of hours, I didn't want it to end. I kept doing side quests, walking around the worlds, trying to find secrets in every nook and cranny. Really just putting off that point of no return. Sure, the weapons could be better, and the fact that I used the same guns the entire game could turn some people off, and missing that one companion still bugs me. Especially because I am somehow worried I might have killed them early on without realizing it. But those are insignificant issues in a game that nails almost everything else.

This feels like a real return to form for Obsidian. A project that balances pushing the envelope further in terms of world-building with humour and honesty. The result isn't just a better version of the first game; it's one of Obsidian's best works to date.

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EDITOR'S CHOICE
8.0

POKÉMON LEGENDS: Z-A

A Mega Evolution For The Series

Developer: Game Freak
Publisher: Nintendo
ESRB Rating: E10 (Everyone 10+)

Release Date: 10/16/2025
Played On: Nintendo Switch 2
Reviewed By: Zubi Khan

Pokémon Legends: Z-A is here, bringing with it the second exciting entry into the *Legends* spinoff series of games, one that gives off the bright glow of a Mega Evolution, surpassing even the might of *Legends Arceus*.

I'll be the first to admit it, I'm a bit of a *Pokémon* Pessimist. After finding myself underwhelmed with the efforts of the last couple of games, particularly those that saw release on the original Nintendo Switch hardware, I thought my admiration for the beloved series was over. Despite it all, I did enjoy my time with *Scarlet*, once it saw a performance boost on Nintendo Switch 2, but, even then, if I had to pick, I found myself enjoying *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* the most out of any modern *Pokémon* release, thanks to its fresh and nonconventional break from the routine of the mainline series.

With the release of *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* as a cross-gen game on both the original Switch and Nintendo Switch 2, it was kind of a given that, at least, from a performative standpoint, the latest entry into the franchise would sing on new hardware. I'm happy to report that *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* is a sight to behold on Nintendo Switch 2, only really held back by constraints put in place by the original Switch.

Everything from the large number of unique NPC characters to the plethora of unique animations for its impressive roster of *Pokémon* present in the game, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* is the most realized the series has been to date, with flashes of brilliance that transport players into what feels like the anime or manga.

Sadly, for everything *Legends: Z-A* does right, the game still has an uncanny feeling of not hitting its full potential. Of course, some of this is attributed to the fact that it's a cross-generational release. Still, even then, for a multimedia juggernaut as big as *Pokémon*, it's hard not to look at it and feel as though the game is cutting corners, especially compared to other big games available on both the original Nintendo Switch and Switch 2 hardware.

Specifically, the lack of voice acting feels incredibly jarring in a game that finally feels like what a console Pokémon experience should be like. Pivotal moments and cutscenes suffer the most, which often feature fantastic animation and dynamic camera angles, that just feel hollow due to the stubborn refusal of any voiced dialogue.

Additionally, despite a fairly robust and expansive map, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* can feel repetitive after 30+ hours confined mostly to Lumiose City. Thankfully, the game does a good job of making your time in the Paris-inspired city fun and varied, with distinct biomes and wild *Pokémon* sections that crop up as players get through the game. The plot sees players climbing the ranks of the titular ZA battle Royale, while putting a stop to the rampant increase of rogue Mega evolutions that have started cropping up in the still-burgeoning city.

In other words, gameplay in *Legends: Z-A* will have players spending their time exploring and catching critters inside the wild areas or designated sections within the city that feature wild Pokémon during the day, while participating in trainer battles at night.

Simply playing the game will gradually turn day to night, which is when sections of the city become the battlegrounds for trainers participating in the battle royale. Sitting on a bench also allows players to quickly change the time of day, making it possible to focus on climbing the ranks, which involves challenging trainers, which earns the player points towards a ticket, which is then used to challenge a leader, similar to the tried and tested gym system found in the mainline games.

Starting from rank Z, some of the early game grind to climb up towards A is fast, with story sequences even allowing the player to skip ahead a few letters, while later levels can take some time to accrue enough points to challenge the leader. Thankfully, the game throws optional tickets into the mix, which add borderline roguelike challenges that grant the player a boost in points towards having enough to challenge the ranking leader. These bonus challenges include stuff like KOing an unsuspecting trainer's *Pokémon*, using a super effective move, or even afflicting a specific status effect on the enemy.

The move to a real-time battle system is also incredibly fun and refreshing, making it easily the best element of *Pokémon Legends: Z-A.* There is a rudimentary but functional sneaking mechanic, which allows players to surprise-attack both wild *Pokémon* and trainers alike. When combined with the real-time battle system, it makes for a fast and frenetic gameplay loop, cutting away the monotony of the static turn-based battles, while still feeling true to the legacy of the mainline franchise.

"The move to a real-time battle system is also incredibly fun and refreshing, making it easily the best element of Pokémon Legends: Z-A."

If I had to compare the battle system to another JRPG juggernaut, *Legends: Z-A* almost feels akin to a lite version of the real-time battles found in *Final Fantasy VII Remake/Rebirth*. Moves are tied to a cooldown, while movement and dodging are tied to the player's inputs. Battles in the game are truly the highlight, even though some moves had to be cut due to the transition to a real-time system.

Of course, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* is a spinoff title, so not adhering to the strict meta of the legacy games is not too surprising, and truth be told, I prefer the dynamic feel of *Z-A* over the legacy games. Thanks to the recent announcement of *Pokémon Champions,* there will always be a place for serious competitive players, which I hope encourages the company to continue experimenting and perfecting the real-time system present in *Z-A*.

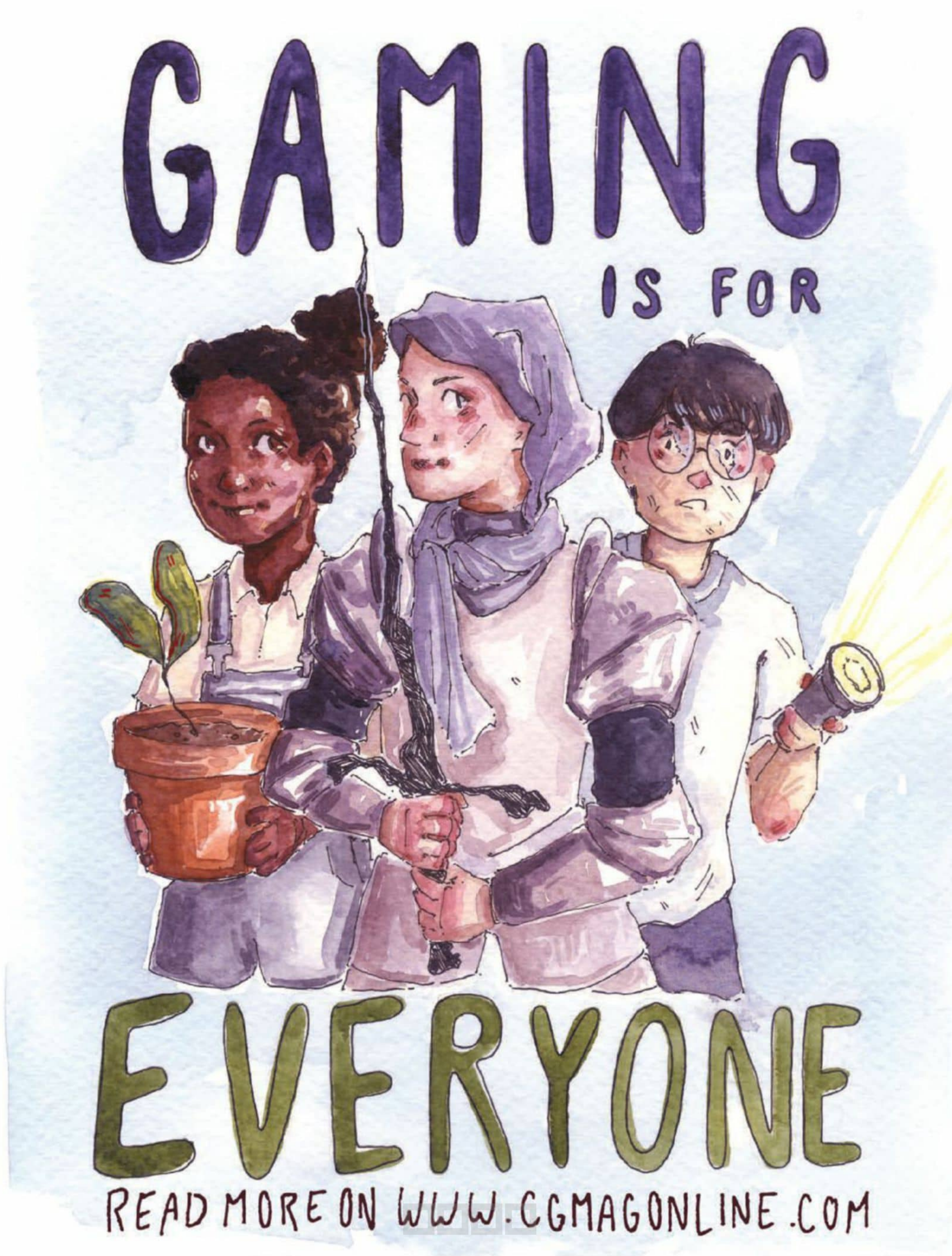
Finally, Mega Evolutions also make a triumphant return, which mostly sticks the landing, particularly when it comes to some of the new forms available for legacy mons. My biggest disappointment, however, when it comes to Mega Evolutions, is instead tied to the Alpha boss battles that break up the battle royale and Pokémon catching sequences.

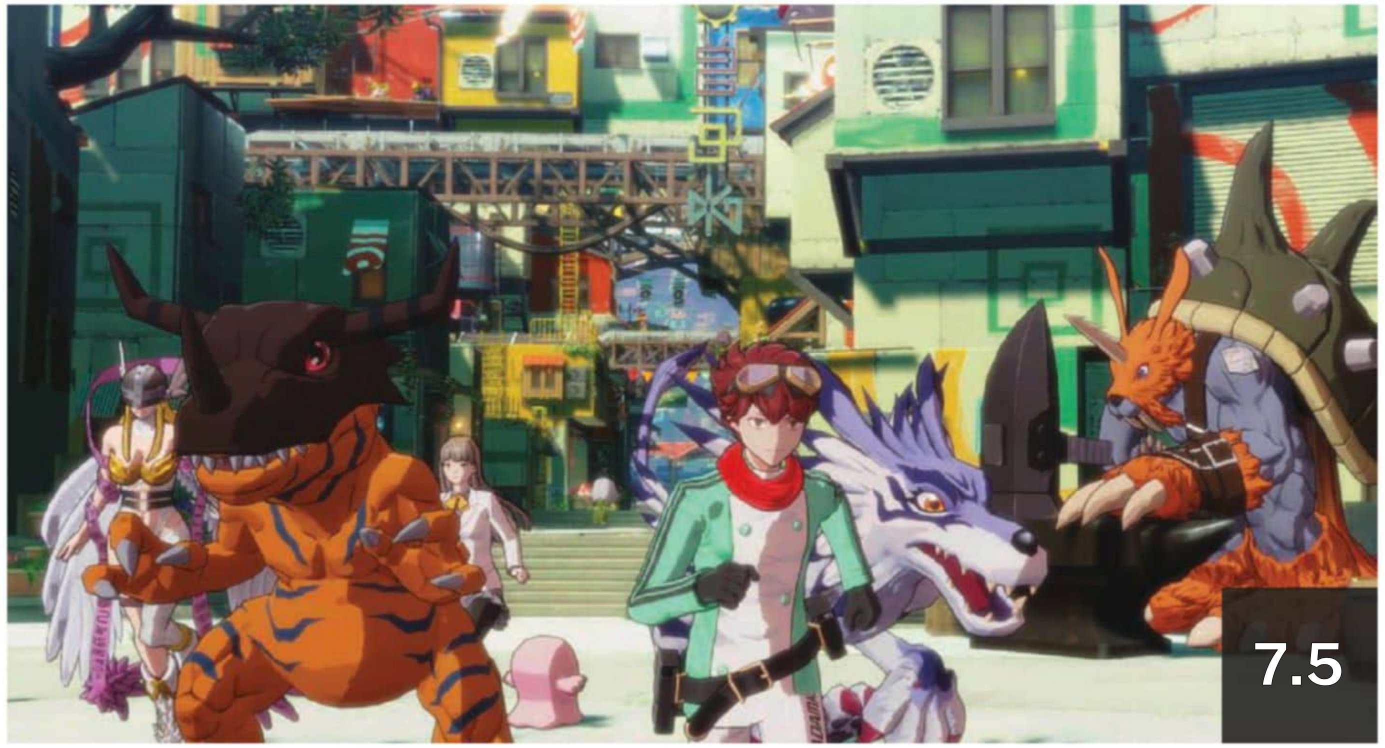
Most encounters with the boss Alphas revolve around finding said *Pokémon* in a random part of the map, often on roofs or other unnecessarily convoluted routes that aren't particularly fun or interesting. Made worse by transporting the player into a static feeling boss arena, devoid of the high energy of the actual Mega-Evolved *Pokémon*.

At the very least, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* does offer some cool interior areas, such as inside buildings, which do feel fully realized and are a considerable step up from the almost cardboard-feeling world of *Scarlet* and *Violet*, although I do wish the game had a few more interior locations, just to help break up the visual fatigue of Lumiose City proper.

The boss battles against Mega-Evolved Alphas also feel much better mechanically than they did in *Legends: Arceus*. This is mainly attributed to the higher frame rate, which allows for more fluid and responsive gameplay, making it actually feel fun and less of a chore or gimmick.

Ultimately, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* is a step in the right direction, even if it still, at times, can feel like baby steps for a series as big as *Pokémon*. Regardless of any reviews, however, if you're a fan of the franchise and especially for those who have Nintendo Switch 2 systems, you're not going to be disappointed with your time with *Pokémon Legends: Z-A*.





DIGIMON STORY TIME STRANGER

Digital Monsters Belong On PC

Developer: Media Vision
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
ESRB Rating: T (Teen)

Release Date: 10/02/2025
Played On: PC (Microsoft Windows)
Reviewed By: Zubi Khan

Digimon Story Time Stranger is here, giving fans of the multimedia darling another solid JRPG experience in the vein of the *Cyber Sleuth* series.

Digimon Story Time Stranger is a difficult review for me to put out. On one hand, the game is a marked improvement over the *Cyber Sleuth* games, featuring larger areas, fleshed-out side quests, a card mini game, and other elements that make for a great sequel. Sadly, on the other hand, the console release of the game, at least on PlayStation 5, feels like a gimped experience that runs at a baffling 30FPS with frame pacing issues that make the game feel sluggish and dated.

Now, don't get me wrong, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is a good-looking game, particularly in the attention to detail to the titular digital monsters, which all feature vibrant and fully animated models that come to life on screen. However, as a whole, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* features average and sometimes vacant dungeons that don't exactly scream current gen, which leaves me to believe the game could have easily hit the 60fps mark. With the lack of a performance toggle, even on PlayStation 5 Pro, it is a rather disappointing showing for an otherwise fine JRPG.

Of course, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is a turn-based affair, so a lock to 30FPS might not be a deal breaker, but for me, if I could go back, I would wholly recommend sticking to the PC release of the game. One final note on performance, if you are planning on playing *Time Stranger* on console, or a lower-powered handheld, applications like Lossless Scaling work very well with the game, offering a convincing 60fps experience, if you have the means to set it up.

Looking past the performance issues, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is a standalone JRPG which roughly borrows story elements from Greek Mythos.

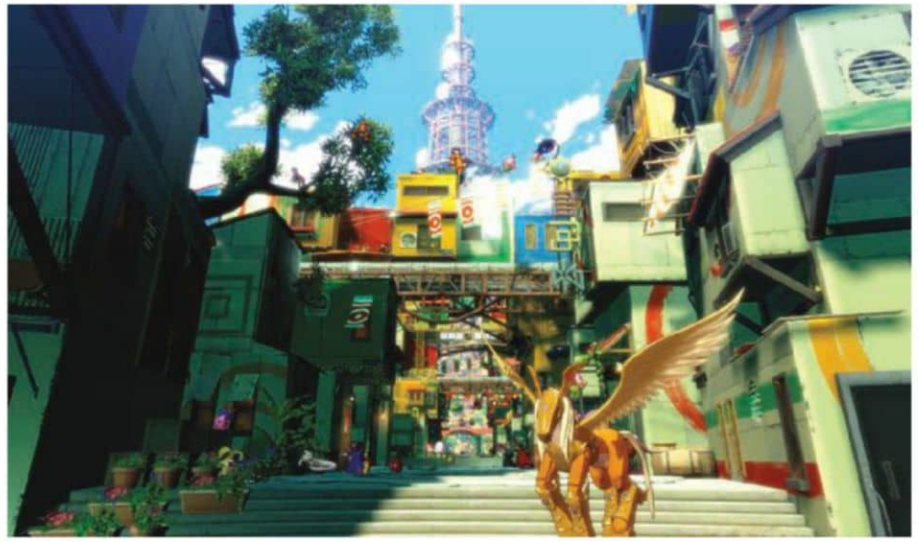
> **“The real draw for me, however, with Time Stranger is the Digimon, which exceeds the 400 mark while simultaneously looking highly detailed and true to the anime.”**

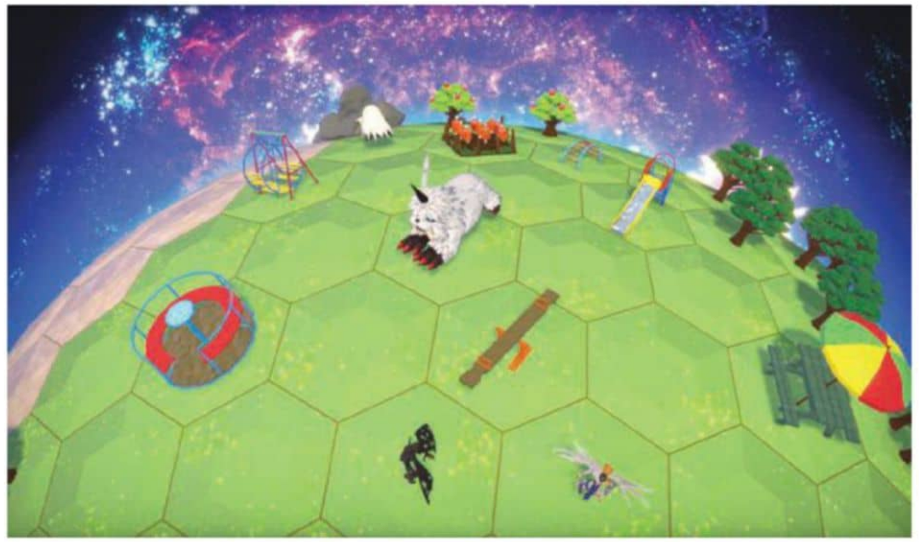
The game features a *Digimon* civil war as the backdrop of an intriguing mystery story, set between the Digital World and contemporary Tokyo, told similarly to the detective elements found in *Digimon: Cyber Sleuth*.

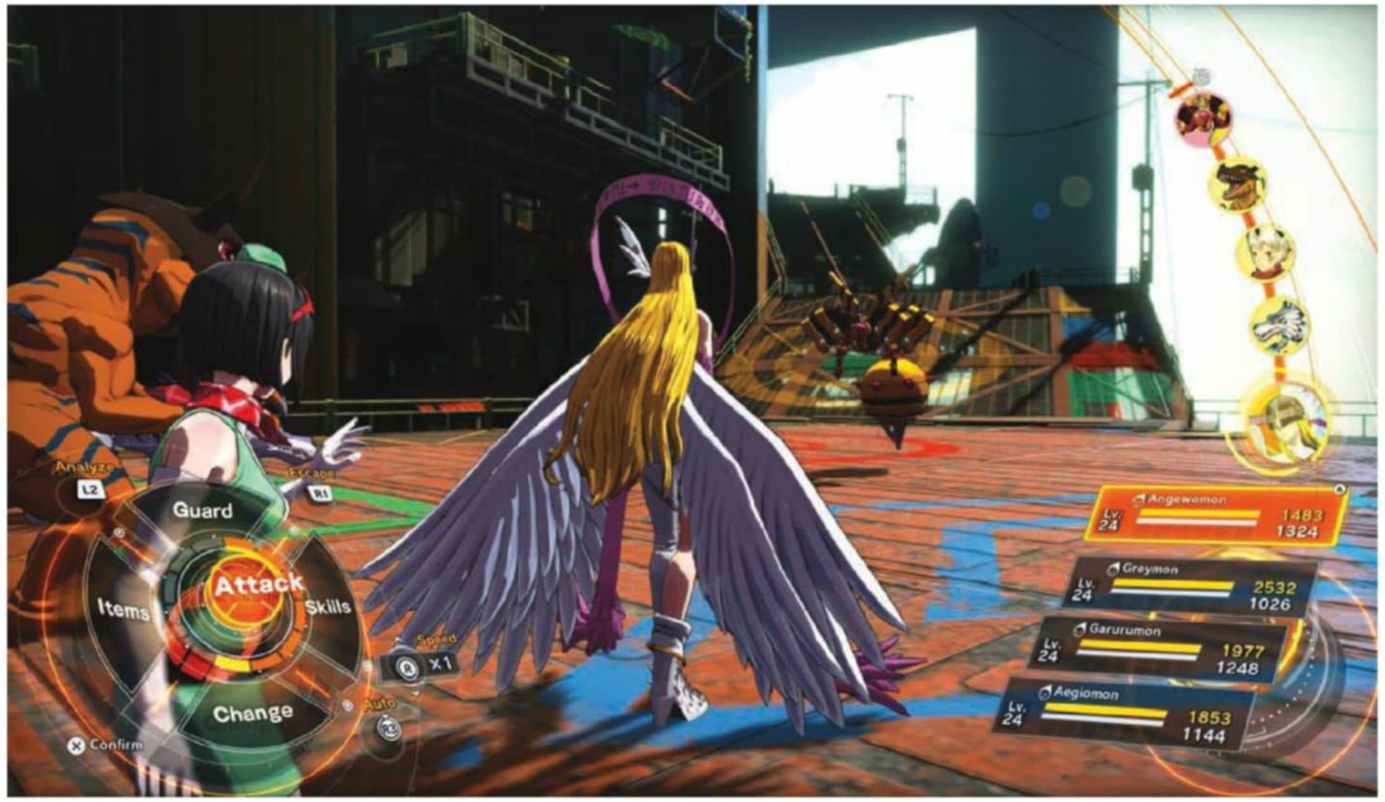
For a game based primarily on a children's property, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is enjoyable enough to keep my attention, even if it doesn't quite reach the same heights as *Persona* or the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, proper. The real draw for me, however, with *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is the *Digimon*, which exceeds the 400 mark while simultaneously looking highly detailed and true to the anime. Even outside of battles, *Digimon* can be found all over the overworld, with many that feature unique idle animations and taunts that trigger when engaging before a fight, making for a world that feels dynamic and lived in.

Battles in *Digimon Story Time Stranger* are typical turn-based affairs. Still, the game does a good job of making each move and attack feel distinct for each monster, with dynamic camera angles and particle effects that elevate it above other *Digimon* titles. Interesting quirks that change things up, such as being able to use an item and attack during the same turn, in addition to X-Art phases, add some variety to the otherwise familiar battle system. X-Art techniques build up over time, allowing players to buff their squad of *Digimon* with powerful augments and other abilities that gradually unlock, which can come in clutch during more challenging encounters.

Similar to games like *Metaphor: ReFantazio*, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* gives the player the option to attack enemies outside of battle, which not only dictates turn order, but can also damage and take out lesser enemies on the overworld map. *Time Stranger* allows players to use overworld skills from their squad of digital monsters to clear debris and make progress. I do wish this mechanic were more fleshed out, similar to the overworld skill system found in the recently remastered release of *Raidou*.







Side quests in *Digimon Story Time Stranger* are simple, but varied and often require the player to swap their outfit for one of the many different costumes available to the player. This is not only fun to change things up with, but it also adds to the mystery shounen anime hero vibe that the game strives to achieve.

> **“Digimon Story Time Stranger gives the player the option to attack enemies outside of battle...”**

Raising and digivolving your *Digimon* is also a surprisingly deep process, one that at times can feel somewhat grindy, requiring the player to grind enough of the same type of enemy, which fills an index up to 200%, which then can be used to summon said *Digimon*, or feed it into an existing creature for a boost in EXP. Later digivolutions also require some hefty stats and optional items, which adds to the variety of the game, but can also take a lot of time, which is where the In-Between Theatre comes in.

The In-Between Theatre, in essence, is like *Persona's* Velvet Room, a place that exists between the Real World and the Digital World and acts as the central hub area to micro-manage your monsters. Players can put their creatures into a daycare system, which features its own biome, which can also be customized with different themed items, but more importantly, allows players to train a specific stat.

Unfortunately, training takes time, which can be sped up with in-game money, but for an exorbitant fee. Digging through the menus also reveals forthcoming paid DLC, which seems to exist solely for making the experience less of a grind, something that feels a bit cheap, more indicative of a mobile game than a full release. Hopefully, there are other means of quickly levelling up that I have yet to discover, such as using PlatinumNumem, like in *Cyber Sleuth*.

Ultimately, *Digimon Story Time Stranger* is a competent JRPG, made better through the lens of nostalgia, but one that suffers more than it should on consoles due to a lack of optimization and grind.

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